

THE LITTLE TOWN

Translated from the German by
WINIFRED RAY

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I

LAWYER BELOTTI strutted up to the table in front of the *Café Progresso*, wiped his short neck with his pocket-handkerchief and said in a smothered voice :

"The diligence is late again."

"Quite so," assented the chemist and the municipal secretary, and since there was really nothing else to be said, they were silent.

The commercial traveller interposed :

"You don't think there's been an accident?"

The others snorted indignantly. The lieutenant of the carabinieri, for the benefit of the stranger who had made the suggestion, enlarged upon the remarkable safety of the roads. He explained that two of his men always accompanied the diligence on horseback, and only once had their intervention been required. That was when a peasant refused to pay for his seat and drew his knife on the driver.

"Such people lack breeding," declared the lieutenant.

"A tedious profession, yours," exclaimed the chemist, Acquistapace, in his good-natured voice. "Pulling drunken men out of ditches and shooing home runaway cows. When we were wearing your uniform, it was all very different. What do you say, friend Achilles?"

"Coming," shouted the landlord from within.

He stamped out, leant his paunch on the back of a chair, and stood there, rolling his tongue in his open mouth.

"What do you say, old man?" and the chemist rapped him on the stomach. "Many a bomb has burst just before our feet! At Bezzacca, with General Garibaldi standing close by us. A bomb explodes; we,

of course, start back ; but the General does not stir ; he gazes into the smoke as though deep in thought, ' Don't be afraid, friends,' he says, and, after that, Achilles, we were no longer afraid."

" That's the plain truth," said the landlord ; and he added emphatically, " the General was a lion."

" He was a lion," repeated the other old man, passing his fingers through his huge moustache and gazing down upon the others. Suddenly he stooped and made a gesture as though fondling a child.

" But he was an angel too : yes, ignorant of many things, like an angel. A lot of things happened, didn't they, old friend, of which he knew nothing ? Every one but the General knew that Nino was a woman."

" Was your Nino a beautiful woman ? " asked lawyer Belotti.

The chemist gave a faint whistle. " There are no more such women ! When her lover was killed, we found out that she was a woman. But she saw no reason to leave us. Though she no longer had the man for whose sake she had joined our ranks, she had all the rest of us. And she loved us all ! "

His brown, dog-like eyes exulted in the recollection. The landlord laughed silently, his paunch shaking up and down until it overturned the chair. His son, the handsome Alfo, had joined them, and young Savezzo, his locks just curled by the barber, had approached from the other side of the Square ; and all of them, as the old men ended, wore an envious expression.

Suddenly they remembered that the story was a very old one, and that all of them, even the commercial traveller, knew it as well as they knew Lucia, the poultry-woman. It was just her time, and already her wooden shoes were clattering down the alley by the side of the Café. With her clucking, louder than the clucking of her hens, and her nose, sharper than a hen's beak,

flapping her long arms, she drove her feathered flock to the fountain and let them drink out of the pool. The children crowded round her, screaming, jostling, plucking at her skirts, and jumping with delight when the old woman in her motley rags, like a tall, scraggy hen, lunged helplessly in all directions. The neighbours flung open their shutters ; at the corner looking sideways from the Café, three officials, passing along the *portici* of the Town Hall, pressed themselves into the niche of one of the old-fashioned windows ; stout Mama Paradisi looked down from her house ; behind, in the Corso, Rina, the tobacconist's little maid, thrust out her head, and lawyer Belotti noticed that she was wearing a new kerchief. " Who can have given it to her this time ? " he pondered, not without concern. Meanwhile Rina had shut her window, and Mama Paradisi had shut hers ; Lucia and all the hubbub she had caused had vanished down her alley until the next day ; the Square slumbered once more in the white sunlight, broken by angular shadows. That of the Palazzo Torroni at the entrance of the Corso tapered across to the cathedral, and before the arched façade of the church the shapes of the two lions supporting columns on their backs were reproduced in black on the paving. The shadow of the bell-tower, with its jagged edge, stretched right up to the fountain. By the side of the tower, however, the sunlight had invaded all but the extreme corner, in which stood the house of the merchant, Mancafede. There it was so dark that the outlines of the windows were barely discernible, but it was certain that behind one of them was standing now, as she always stood, unseen, the enigma of the town—Evangeline Mancafede, who never went out, yet knew everything that happened, and knew it before any one else. Every one in the town did all that he did beneath the eyes of this unseen observer. It seemed as though

from her shadowy corner she could see into all the houses on the Square : only one was hidden from her by the tower—the Palazzo Torroni ; but it was rumoured that she had no wish to know anything about the Palazzo, and that her father and her maid—the only persons who ever saw her—dared not mention the Baron in her presence, since he, whom she had loved, had married another. From that time she had not left the house ! Then she was twenty-four, and now she was thirty-three.

“ A beautiful woman,” whispered the lawyer into the ear of the commercial traveller. “ From sitting still she has the figure of a Juno, so they say.”

He raised his hands in a gesture intended to indicate such a figure, and then quickly dropped them again, for doubtless she was watching him. The commercial traveller asked :

“ And has she really not been outside the house since my last visit ? ”

“ Certainly not ! ”

They all looked hurt.

“ She promises to go out whenever the old man urges her. Then he orders fine clothes for her—from Rome even, for after all she is the richest girl in the town, and would have had a dowry of a hundred thousand lire ; he invites her former girl friends, gives instructions for the carriage to be got ready. . . . The moment arrives, the carriage and the friends are waiting before the house, and Evangelina in her beautiful clothes begins to descend the staircase. But half-way down she stops, says ‘ Not to-day, another time,’ and goes back to her room.”

Several of the listeners peeped out of the corners of their eyes towards the mysterious house. Below, as though in some dark cavern, a light was glimmering, and in front of his store the merchant was pacing slowly

backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. The guests of the *Café Progresso* could watch him, and feel as they watched that time was slipping away.

The chemist rose, for a customer had entered his shop—the innkeeper's boy. What could be up with Malandrini, the innkeeper? Doubtless something to do with his wife, whom the tobacconist had observed only yesterday in rather suspicious colloquy with Baron Torroni. What could she be wanting at the chemist's now?

"Well——?" All eyes were fixed on old Acquistapace, as he came back, swinging his wooden leg.

"His mother-in-law has heartburn."

The heads drooped again.

"Not much going on here," remarked the lieutenant of the carabinieri to the commercial traveller, and he nodded towards the corner, where the merchant, Mancafede, was pacing backwards and forwards. The commercial traveller was about to make some polite excuse for the town, but lawyer Belotti said in a smothered voice:

"What can be expected, when that confounded diligence is an hour late! For after all—let us face the truth!—very great things may happen any day. The town is on the eve of events, which——"

"—do not occur," finished the municipal secretary, and he leant back so as to show off his figure.

"Who says so?"

The lawyer gesticulated before he could speak.

"Do you deny that I am the chairman of the committee, and that therefore I must be the first to know whether anything is happening and whether anything, I repeat, can happen?"

"Before the post has arrived?"

"The post! The post, my friend, has arrived many times before now. The post has, for instance, brought

me—mark me well, sir ! me, the chairman of the committee—a letter from Her Excellency the Principessa Cipolla, with the gracious permission of Her Excellency to use the Castle Theatre for the performances of the company, which we, the committee, propose to engage. And this was no small achievement, if you consider——”

The lawyer turned to the commercial traveller ; with one of his shrunken fingers, which looked so much older than his face, he pointed over his shoulder to the street winding up towards the castle.

“—that the theatre has been in existence for fifty years—let us be exact, for forty-eight years and three-quarters—that is to say, ever since the wedding of the poor Prince.”

“ Was it a good performance, sir ? ” asked the municipal secretary in a caustic tone. “ Did you act as impresario even then ? For when were you ever idle ? Probably not even when you were in long clothes.”

“ Of the poor Prince,” continued the lawyer, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, “ whose loss Her Excellency is still mourning. Therefore I venture to say that our request was granted—thanks to myself, very particularly, and to the circumstance that I am the Princess’s legal adviser.”

“ But the conductor ? ” asked the other. “ Is no credit due to him ? Also, tell our friend whether you and all the rest could play your instruments in *Povera Tonietta* but for our maestro, Dorlenghi ! ”

“ Does any one deny his talent ? As for that, the parish pays him a hundred lire a month and the church pays him fifty. But don’t you gentlemen think that we have had to wait a very long time for the artists, whom he was to procure for us ? ”

“ I wager they’ll be sitting in to-day’s diligence ! ” cried the chemist. The lawyer doubted it.

“ As chairman of the committee, perhaps I shall have

to go and find them myself. Who knows where I shall go—as far as Rome, perhaps.”

“But lawyer Belotti,” said the municipal secretary, “what do you know about the theatre?”

“I? You forget, Signor Camuzzi, that I studied in a city like Perugia. There we frequently had companies of actors, and we students, I can assure you, were on just as easy terms with them as I am with you. The chorus girls! But there! the word is enough. . . . And then of course there was the prima donna, but for her one had to be rich, very rich; I remember there was a gentleman in the city who gave her three hundred lire a month. Would you believe it? Three hundred lire for a woman!”

Seeing only respect in the faces around him, the lawyer expanded. He opened his black coat, though there was no waistcoat underneath it. He gesticulated with his arms until the coarse yellow cuffs fell down showing his coral studs, and in a half-whisper, rising from time to time to a hoarse bark, he continued:

“But such is the great world, if you only knew. And the artists are the most splendid of all. You have no idea what a life these actors and artists lead. Champagne every night, beautiful women—as many as they want—and never out of bed before noon.”

“When I was stationed at Forli,” said the lieutenant of the carabinieri, “I met an artist who could drink two bottles straight off. He was, to be sure, a German.”

“And why should they be,” concluded the lawyer, “since their acting brings them in more money than they need, and they have no cares? For citizens like ourselves the world is quite a different matter. But it is no bad thing that there should also be people who lead such an easy life, who can kick over the traces to their hearts’ content and be always in high spirits. Once we have a few of that kind here, life will begin to be merry.”

"No harm in that!" exclaimed the chemist. Immediately after he closed his lips and cast a furtive glance up at his house. The others smiled. He excused himself.

"There are always people about who are in league with the priests."

The lawyer declared :

"If we did not send for the actors for our own satisfaction, we ought to do it in order to annoy the priests."

The municipal secretary shrugged his shoulders, but the landlord whispered in his bass voice :

"What, are we still slaves of the Pope?"

"Bravo, Achilles!" shouted the rest—and over the way they saw a black figure glide out of the cathedral, cross the Corso and enter the Palazzo Torroni. The chemist sighed.

"Poor Baron! They've got him in their clutches too, through his wife, and that means the end of peace in the home. Take my advice, you young men, don't marry a woman who is hand and glove with the priests!"

The lawyer put his hand to his mouth.

"And none the less Don Taddeo is duped, and the Baron has sent me secretly—under an assumed name, of course—his contribution towards the theatre."

Eagerly he watched the effect of his words, then laid his fingers on his lips, and, after a pause, resumed :

"The contribution is in fact generous enough to console us for the absence of old Nardini."

"A great family, the Nardinis," said the chemist, thumping his stick on the pavement.

"They do not consider their fellow-citizens worthy to associate with them; they refused to join the Club, and they are sending their granddaughter to a convent!"

"She is not there yet," remarked young Savezzo, who was leaning against the wall of the house in an

attitude of boorish elegance. "And when I gave my lecture on friendship at the Club, she sent her maid so that she might hear about it."

"Ha, Toto would like to keep her out of her convent."

Conscious of their mocking glances, the left eye of the young man began to squint at his pock-marked nose.

Handsome Alfo, the landlord's son, said :

"Alba is certainly a beauty !"

And he gazed round with tranquil conceit.

"You will neither of you have any success"—and the municipal secretary laughed aloud. "Why, not even Severino Salvatori could win her, though he drives about in a basket carriage. Yet possibly you might, if you were prepared to forego a dowry. For the old man wants to get rid of her cheaply. His meanness exceeds even his piety."

"He is pious," asserted Savezzo. "And charitable. He has been supporting old Brabrà entirely for nearly thirty years. And at Villascura flour is distributed to the poor every Sunday after mass. Alba does it herself."

"Alba herself," repeated Alfo.

"But when I brought him the list," said the lawyer, raising his finger, "do you know what Nardini said ?"

They all knew, but they were glad to hear it repeated for the tenth time.

"He said that if it were a case of paying for, the artists to keep away, then he would pay."

The chemist struck the table with his fist ; the others preserved a brooding silence. Then handsome Alfo declared, displaying his white teeth in a fatuous smile :

"None the less, I intend to marry Alba."

No one vouchsafed him a reply.

"And then," Achilles recalled, "he leased his water-fall to the town at a very high price."

"Our own fault"—and the municipal secretary shrugged his shoulders ; "I was against the electricity

scheme and I still am. But no one listens to me," with a glance at the lawyer, who flung out his arms.

"Do we want progress, yes or no?" he cried in a hoarse wheeze.

"And whom have we to thank for it," answered young Savezzo, "if not the lawyer?"

"Is it worthy of a town like ours," continued the lawyer, "that its public squares should be lit by petroleum? And what sort of a figure should we cut before the foreign visitors who will flock here when our theatrical season has begun?"

"Quite so," said the others; only the secretary made a gesture of dissent.

"There you are! Because we have a theatrical season, we must instal electric light, and because we celebrate the anniversary of the constitution like Venice or Turin, we must needs burn away five thousand lire in a fireworks display. Thus one act of megalomania brings another in its train, and the end, I foresee, will be bankruptcy. And the blame, gentlemen, does not rest with our worthy mayor, Signor Augusto Salvatori, who now never stirs outside his house; it rests with one person alone!"

And he pointed his finger at the lawyer, who was fidgeting in his seat.

"Do we want progress, yes or no?"

At this moment the lieutenant put his hand to his ear:

"I think I can hear horses."

At once they all assumed a listening attitude. Savezzo and Alfo rushed to the corner of the house and gazed down the street. Suddenly they put their hands to their mouths and yelled:

"Hi! Masetti! Slower!"

And amid much furious cracking of the whip, they heard the diligence clattering along the highway below.

As it turned the curve towards the gate, they began to enumerate fantastic instances of Mascetti's unpunctuality ; he was in no hurry to get back to his wife. Then, as he drove round on to the Square, they all started to whistle. The two carabinieri dismounted from their horses, took off their three-cornered hats and began to mop their heads. The diligence rattled off towards the post office. There it was seen to be quite full. Eight people were seated inside, and one clambered down from the box—a thick-set man with the profile of a Cæsar, whom the commercial traveller might almost have mistaken for a member of his calling, had it not been for his bluish, close-shaven cheeks and the remarkable formality and decision of his movements.

No sooner had the horses been brought to a standstill than two nuns pushed their way out over the feet of the other passengers, and hurried up the steps of the road leading to the convent, so fast that the crosses of their rosaries danced up and down on their hips. Then a handsome, pale-faced young man got out, and looked about him unconcernedly.

"Nello !" cried a woman's voice. "Help me out !"

"Allow me," said a lean old man, dressed in white, whose movements had a youthful briskness ; and he stretched out a wrinkled hand displaying a large diamond ring.

"Why, there they are ! Those are the actors. As chairman of the committee, I must welcome them."

He got up and strutted across the Square. The others followed at a distance.

A laughing, black-haired girl was lifted out of the diligence, but the man who was supporting her from behind—the lawyer involuntarily stopped half-way—the man with the fair moustache and the red face, was no other than Baron Torrioni ! He turned round ; beaks protruded from his game-bag ; and he assisted

another woman to alight, an insignificant little person in a dingy cloak that hung round her like a sack. From the back of the coach, his face expressing mingled delight and consternation, emerged Polli, the tobacconist.

"Hullo, Polli! What have you been up to?" shouted the chemist.

The tobacconist joined the group.

"Oh yes, you may well ask! One of them nearly gave me a kiss, that big, black-haired girl."

"A fine woman. What a voice she must have!" said the lawyer.

"She can shriek, I can tell you! The stories that have been told in that old coach to-day! I should like to know if those two nuns had ever heard their like. They prayed louder and louder, and look now, how they're running!"

"Why on earth must those holy petticoats be always dashing about?" said the lawyer. "Our streets swarm with them."

Polli whispered:

"And look at the old man; he is rouged!"

The group of citizens cast furtive glances in the direction of the actors. The lawyer was finding it more difficult to make friends with them than it had been in his student days. The thick-set man from the box-seat, who inspired him with most confidence, was giving orders to the driver to lift down the luggage. Baron Torroni shook hands with the rest. He promised to send some of his game to their hotel, bowed to them in his stiff, cavalry-officer fashion, and forced his way through the crowd of children and servant girls which had now collected. As he strode off to his house in his leather gaiters, a black figure glided out and disappeared into the church.

Several tradespeople had arrived on the scene to see about their packages. The merchant, Mancafede, had

been busy over his for a long time. Despite the heat of the late summer, he was wearing his thick brown jacket. His profile was like that of an old hare, and his eyes, under their shelving brows, were peering anxiously and persistently under the hampers on the roof of the coach.

"And the petroleum?" he asked patiently, pointing his lean finger at the driver, Masetti. The latter made a gesture of exasperation. He shouted down that he was not paid for all this trouble; these strangers had luggage enough for a whole railway train; another coach was following with passengers and trunks; no doubt, if God so willed, the petroleum was on that. And flushed an even deeper crimson than usual by the ungraciousness of his reception, he flourished his outstretched arms furiously above the crowd, beneath the blue sky.

The merchant surveyed him with his blinking eyes; then he turned to the tobacconist:

"Polli, your maid did not sleep at home last night."

The tobacconist reddened.

"Did Evangelina say so?"

"Yes," declared Mancafede with tranquil conviction.

"And my daughter also says that the actors are coming. . . . Those are they perhaps?"—and now for the first time he began to look about him.

"My Lina knows that the famous tenor, Giordano, is with them."

Suddenly the old man dressed in white turned round, and remarked carelessly but with dignity: "I am he, Cavaliere Giordano."

In a moment the lawyer was bending over the hand of the old singer.

"You, Cavaliere! Delighted to meet you again! You remember our intimacy in Perugia? Belotti, lawyer Belotti. We both used to frequent the *Café Fede Antica*. We played dominoes, and I always won; you had to pay for all my punch. . . . What, you

have forgotten? Oh well, it was a good thirty years ago, and what experiences you must have had since then! Fame, women, travels! That's my idea of life. Here in this little town—well, you will get to know us; we too know how to be merry, we too know how to appreciate art. My friends will be happy to make your acquaintance."

He beckoned to them.

"Signor Acquistapace, our chemist; Signor Polli, who travelled with you; Signor Cantinelli, the gallant leader of our armed force . . ."

And to avoid the necessity of introducing his enemy, the municipal secretary, he singled out another of the bystanders.

"Signor Chiaralunzi, a highly expert tailor, who will perform upon the tenor horn in the orchestra."

"And what a performance!" bleated the spiteful treble voice of Nonoggi, the barber.

But the tall, stout-limbed tailor stepped forward, fixed the strangers with his slow, honest stare, and then bowed in front of the insignificant little woman in the dingy cloak so low that the tips of his rust-coloured moustache dangled in the air. She was standing apart from her companions, who were whispering and laughing together, and they could see that her hands were clenched in her pockets; with eyes set wide apart she was coldly surveying the rapidly increasing crowd, as though matching her strength against theirs. At the sight of the tailor bending before her, she gave a sudden childlike smile, and held out her little grey hand.

Then he shook hands with the old tenor, who made a comprehensive gesture towards the other singers, without looking at them, like a sovereign presenting his suite.

"Signor Virginio Gaddi, baritone."

The thick-set man with the Cæsar-like profile, one hand in his trouser pocket, joined the group of citizens.

" Signorina Italia Molesin, soprano."

The buxom black-haired girl laughed, displaying a row of large teeth, and shrugged her shoulders coquettishly, so that her shawl fell back ; for, like most of the girls, she was wearing a shawl, not a hat.

" Signor Nello Gennari, lyrical tenor."

Then the women saw the dead-white face of the youngest of the men turn towards them. Because it was finely and firmly chiselled, even those right at the back were impressed ; they craned their necks and said aloud :

" Oh ! Isn't he handsome ! "

His eyes thanked them all, without surprise and without enthusiasm, with a touch of melancholy disdain.

But now the Cavaliere Giordano turned round to the girl who was standing apart, made her a slight bow, and said in an ecstatic tone :

" And this is our prima donna assoluta, Signorina Flora Garlinda, an artist with an immense future, the hope of Italy's lyrical stage."

Thereupon he gazed expectantly at the citizens. The lawyer, who was standing next to him, drew back a little, and then began to pay his respects to the prima donna, the more zealously since before he had hardly noticed her. He asked her whether she had already sung at the Scala. She shrugged her shoulders and curved her lips as though expressing her contempt for the Scala. Then he made a low bow.

" A young lady like yourself must have as many lovers as she wants."

She burst out laughing and turned her back on him. He cast a furtive glance to right and left to see if any one had noticed it ; but at that moment there was a movement of the crowd ; some one was forcing his way through, gesticulating wildly with upraised arms.

"The maestro!"

He had reached them; he was panting. His fair complexion had turned quite pink under his thin, light beard; his embarrassed, self-assertive smile came and went, and then it became evident that he was angry. He began:

"This is really. . . . I believe that I am the conductor. . . . The artists whom I engaged arrive and no one sends for me? Lawyer, I must. . . ."

The lawyer patted him on the back.

"My dear Dirlenghi, everything is going on very nicely. In my capacity of chairman of the committee, I have already made friends with these ladies and gentlemen."

"But I fail to understand how, in my absence. . . . Very well then, you shall have my conductor's baton!"

"Don't upset yourself, Dirlenghi!" said the chemist; and Polli, the tobacconist, added:

"It isn't worth the trouble."

The musician flung up his arms still higher.

"Not worth the trouble! Ah! Cavaliere! For, if I am not mistaken, you are Cavaliere Giordano; my name is Enrico Dirlenghi, and I am conductor of a village band, nothing more. I have been sitting in my room, back there in a corner of the town, far from the sights and sounds of the world, and I have written a mass, which I shall conduct in the church this autumn. Meanwhile these gentlemen have been harvesting the fruits of my exertions; for I am proud, Cavaliere, to have secured you for our stage, you and your colleagues. Not worth the trouble! If you only knew what an event this is for a martyred exile——"

He walked round the diligence by the side of the old singer; his panting voice was frequently inaudible, for the people were shouting after him—some, "Bravo, maestro!" others, "Look at him, he's gone crazy!"

But the bulk of the crowd did not know what it was all about, and they shouted : "Hullo, Masetti !" at the driver, who, reduced to speechlessness by the insults showered upon him, was tugging at his horses, while the boys crept between the legs of the crowd and made snatches at him. He struck out. . . . Meanwhile the conductor once more came into view, still gesticulating. Suddenly he stopped before the *prima donna*. As the *Cavaliere* introduced her, they gazed at one another. The musician was suddenly struck dumb ; the young singer looked as though she were taking his measure, and the hands which they were about to extend drew back slightly. Then they exchanged greetings ; he, flushed with shy ambition, she with the same resolute glance of one prepared for battle with which she had surveyed the crowd. The conductor said :

"I should not venture to attempt *Povera Toniella*, had I not secured you for the principal role, Signorina Flora Garlinda."

She smiled graciously.

"Your name too, *macestro*, is beginning to be famous. Only recently, at Sogliacco, Cremonesi, the stage manager, said . . ."

A hungry look came into his face. But her words were cut short just as he was beginning to swallow them greedily. *Malandrini*, the innkeeper, was offering her one of his two rooms. He had succeeded somehow or other in quietly forcing his huge, stout person through the crowd ; now he was smiling his broad, ingratiating smile, and already knew every one by name.

"You, *Cavaliere*, must have my best salon ! As ill luck would have it, the commercial traveller who comes here regularly is staying at my house, and also a foreigner, a private gentleman. Otherwise, I should invite all these ladies and gentlemen. But you, Signorina Flora Garlinda . . ."

The prima donna declined ; she was too poor to stay at the inn.

"Cremonesi," said the maestro anxiously, "is said to be very gifted."

Nonoggi, the hairdresser, intervened ; with a bow he introduced himself to the artists. He was holding a barber's block, and he murmured under his breath :

"Oh, what beautiful wigs ! How could any one wearing such a wig fail to succeed !"

"What do I hear ?" said the innkeeper. "The Cavaliere has already made arrangements for a lodging with the municipal secretary ? But Signorina Italia Molesin ? Let us come to an understanding, Signorina ! You are the belle of the company . . ."

"His opinion carries weight," said the conductor. "I believe that at the present time, as stage manager——"

"And you gentlemen," screeched the little barber, "pray stroke my cheek and tell me if you would have guessed that a beard ever grew there. That's the way I shave !"

"Ah ! That's splendid ! You too, Signor Nello Gennari. Signorina Italia and Signor Nello," shouted the innkeeper, "are to be the honoured guests of the *Albergo Luna*. Masetti, the luggage ! Now friends, clear the way !"

The buxom, black-haired girl raised her fan and struck the head of a half-tipsy fellow who had touched her ; and she laughed with her full, throaty voice.

"Look, how jolly she is !" shouted the crowd. "Isn't she a dear !"

"But what an ill-natured face the other one has ! Did you ever see any one so ill-natured ! She will play the witch"—and the women went right up to the prima donna, and their hostile eyes gazed right into hers.

"I wcn't marry you," declared Alfo, the son of the

Café proprietor, and he smiled fatuously. She looked at him without mockery, her hands in the pockets of her cloak.

“Nor I you, you handsome fellow !”

“He is not the handsomest now,” said one woman, putting her hand to her bosom. “Your tenor is the handsomest.”

“He looks like a young saint !”

“If only I had a son like him ! My son is ugly and he beats me.”

“Show us your face ! I want to kiss you.”

“Oh, you shameless woman !”

And from the midst of the crowd came the sound of a box on the ear.

“Bravo !” shouted some male voices. “The women have gone crazy.”

“I should fall in love with him myself !” boomed the honest bass voice of the chemist, Acquistapace ; and all round there rose up a chorus of dreamy, ecstatic, excited voices :

“Oh, his eyes ! He is looking at me !”

He was standing alone ; his companions had moved away, as they did on the stage, when the applause was addressed to him alone ; with arms crossed and shoulders raised, he surveyed the faces of the crowd with his ready and yet not altogether happy smile. The crowd exclaimed :

“Long live Gennari !”

The boys echoed :

“Long live Gennari !” Some one began to clap, others followed until there was clapping all over the Square.

The tumult was interrupted by the loud peal of a bell ; and as the Ave sounded from the tower, the people all turned away. Silently the crowd separated, leaving a clear passage, at the end of which the young singer

could see the bare façade of the church, lit up by a last streak of sunlight. Above him the bells were pealing, below all was silent, and suddenly, at the end of the clear space, a woman dressed in black passed rapidly across the ray of sunlight. She was small and slim, and she bent forward slightly in her haste ; as the dying sunlight shone through her black veil, Nello Gennari could discern a white, a very white profile, with eyelids that were half-closed and remained half-closed. She reached the church-porch, mounted the steps between the lions, and only her thick coil of auburn hair glistened in the sunlight. Then she turned round, right round, and gazed down the alley formed by the crowd. At the end of it Nello was standing with his arms no longer crossed, and his smile came and went as his eyes tried to pierce the veil and rest on the pale oval face. . . . Another moment and the bells were silent, the crowd closed up again, and with a start the tenor saw turned towards him all those faces that he had forgotten.

His comrade, the baritone, stood before him and said :

"I have been wandering about, trying to find lodgings. They're cheap enough, if you're not particular."

"Gaddi, who was that woman?"

"A woman already? Always women! What a fellow you are, Nello! You certainly don't lose any time."

"Who was she?"

"I saw nothing, my poor Nello. How could I? I am the father of a family and weighed down with cares. I shall have a wife and three children here presently, and it's a case of finding them a shelter. I am looking for one Savezzo, who is said to have rooms."

"Saw nothing! And you must—— No, stay!

This is important ; you must have passed quite close to her."

"How many women haven't I passed ! And you, Nello, will soon pass by this one as heedlessly as the rest. Farewell."

And with his firm stride and his Cæsar-like profile the baritone proceeded on his quest. The tenor forced his way distractedly through the crowd. "Only to pass near her," he thought. "I shall never find her again, but if I do, then I shall love her, for ever and ever." A gigantic feather fan wafted a puff of perfumed air into his face. Mama Paradisi, flanked by her two daughters, blocked the young man's path.

"It's he !" all three exclaimed in a loud whisper ; they stared at him seductively out of their broad, soft, powdered faces, dropped their fans, and their bosoms heaved under their transparent blouses. The young man had unconsciously smiled in response. In soft, cushiony voices they assured him that they meant to go to the theatre for his sake.

"We adore art. If we clap very loud, will you repeat one of your songs to please us ?"

He promised fervently, laying his hand on his heart and gazing deeply into all three pairs of eyes.

A violent movement of the crowd separated him from the ladies. On the opposite side, where a pair of wax-pale hands were waving in the air, rose a shrill, angry, wailing voice.

"You will rue it ! Off to your homes ! Oh, you rabble ! You run after the actors, as though holding fast to Satan's tail, to be quite sure of finding the road to hell."

"Don Taddeo is not in a good humour to-day," said some one, and the tenor looked into a face framed in studiously disordered locks, with a pock-marked nose, and a roving left eye.

"I am Savezzo. Your colleague, Gaddi, is to lodge at our house. Moreover, I too am an artist. We shall understand one another."

Nello Gennari absently put out his hand. "What did they want of me, those women? Oh, always the same thing. And I rise to their bait every time. It begins to sicken me. . . . But she? Who was she?"

"Listen, Signor Savezzo, I just now saw . . ."

But he was interrupted by the weak, wrathful voice, which seemed to be launching a frenzied attack on the crowd over whose heads those restless hands were gesticulating.

"Away with them, before it is too late! Else the contagion of sin will spread, and you will be consumed in its flames! Woe to those who called these people hither! And cursed be he who shall take them into his house!"

Several women's voices replied:

"He is right; we do not want to be damned."

Young Savezzo shrugged his shoulders.

"What is he fussing about? Why should an honest fellow like Signor Gaddi . . ."

"Signor Savezzo, a few moments ago I saw a woman enter the cathedral, who was she?"

"The cathedral? So many enter the cathedral . . ."

"A black veil, a coil of auburn hair."

"We have no auburn coils here. How that priest shrieks! And always the same thing; one can't hear one's self speak."

"Very slim and a very white skin," implored the tenor.

The other's expression remained unchanged. Suddenly he turned away and ejaculated between his teeth: "Ho, Ho!"

"Why do you stand there and rub shoulders with vice? Be off! Oh, that a sign from heaven might reveal to you your peril, blind that you are!"

The hands raised above the heads of the crowd seemed to be wrestling with heaven in mortal agony, like saintly, dying virgins.

"Such fanaticism is disgusting," said lawyer Belotti in a smothered voice. "But, in spite of this melancholy fellow from the sacristy, you ladies need not doubt that we are quite aware what we owe to art. I, for my part, shall now with all the more alacrity take the liberty of placing my house at your disposal, Signorina Flora Garlinda."

The prima donna replied :

"I thank you. But that would not be suitable for me."

Then Acquistapace, the chemist, advanced boldly.

"If the Signorina prefers not to lodge with a bachelor, I am a married man ; we are a very respectable family, and we quite realise that art and vice are two different things . . ."

"Romolo !" shouted a shrill voice just behind him.

"My love ?"—and the voice of the old soldier struggled to preserve its firmness.

Suddenly there was a general uproar ; the crowd surged apart, and some boys ran away screaming.

"The priest has been kicking them," said the lawyer. "He is proceeding to acts of violence. Are we to allow our children to be ill-treated by this wretched fellow ?"

At the same time he gently retreated towards Nonoggi's shop. The chemist had disappeared, and many of the rest who had been standing near mingled unobtrusively with the diminishing crowd. In front of the singers there was now a clear semicircular space. The tailor, Chiaralunzi, strode across it. He approached the prima donna, but instead of completing his last stride he hesitated as though anxious to spare her the inconvenience of his presence. Then he began to speak, rubbing together the palms of his large white hands, while his long moustache moved up and down.

"Because I understand that the Signorina is the only one of the company who has not yet found a lodging, and although I am of course unworthy, yet what my wife cooks can be eaten, for she cooks in the Genoese fashion, for she had an aunt in Genoa . . ."

"And you want me to lodge with you?"

"Yes, Signorina, that was my meaning."

"I will gladly. Come along! That is all the luggage I have."

The tailor lifted the little trunk on to his shoulder as though heaving it to a great height, and strode off, while the dishevelled little lady stepped quickly after him across the Square, from which the crowd had now ebbed.

"It is true that I blow the tenor horn," he said, "but, in order that I may not annoy the Signorina, I shall take it up to the acropolis."

"Do all of you here play musical instruments? And do you practise with the maestro?"

"Oh! I do not need to practise with him. For I myself am the conductor of a little band and I play on Sundays in the villages. We live as best we can. If only it were not for the accursed competition! The Signorina heard no doubt what Nonoggi, the barber, said about me? For he is my enemy. He too has a little band . . ."

"But the maestro, how do you get on with him?"

"The maestro? That is quite a different matter. He has studied at the conservatoire."

"Oh, he has studied."

"He is a very great musician and a good man."

"A very great musician he may be, but a good man? I did not care for him. He looks like a man who would begrudge success to all but himself. I should not put much trust in him."

The tailor turned round amazed, and looked down

from his height at the face from which were proceeding these surprising statements. She nodded up at him so sternly and resolutely that a shudder passed down his spine.

"The Signorina is right, no doubt," he said submissively. "One never quite knows people. Once, when I was in the army, I had a friend . . ."

They passed down the poultry-woman's alley. The Square behind them was now almost deserted. A last chattering group was broken up by the shouts of the women, "Come in to dinner!" and melted away into the darkness. An old man hobbled up to the Town Hall, lit two oil lamps and proceeded obliquely across the Square to the third lamp by the Palazzo Torroni. He was on his way to the fourth lamp in front of the cathedral, when he was startled by the sudden appearance of Nello Gennari, the tenor.

"Listen! You no doubt know all the people here? I insist on your telling me who that woman was dressed in black. She entered the cathedral as the Ave sounded."

Then, as the old man only grinned:

"Do you want money? Oh, it is hopeless. I am the victim of some mystery. She entered alone, in front of them all, and no one saw her. Good night, old man, every one is dumb."

He flung up his arms, and then, lifting the curtain of the cathedral door, he slipped inside.

"Suppose she were there still? Perhaps she is waiting for me! Or perhaps she was a vision, seen by none but myself?"

His glance wandered through the shadowy spaces of the church.

"Oh, Alba! Oh, sweet morning light, dawn, dawn for me! I love you. If I find you, I wish only to be consumed in your flame. Am I never to love? I hate the other women I have had. I am twenty years of

age, and I want to love you, oh, Alba ! for ever and ever."

He reeled, overcome by his emotion. As he left the church, in the darkest corner, near the bell-tower, a figure was moving slowly backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. The tenor hastened towards it.

"Hi ! my good fellow, tell me . . ."

"What's that ?" asked Mancasfede, the merchant, and he came to a halt.

"Excuse me, sir . . ."

The young man recovered his senses with a start. For an hour he had been living in a world of adventures, adventures that embraced the whole population, yet concerned only himself. This town and its miracle had been waiting for him. He flew from one to the other, the sole sentient being in a crowd of enchanted stones, and questioned them concerning the mysterious woman.

"I only wanted . . .," he stammered. "I am a stranger here, sir."

"Quite so," said the merchant. "One of the actors."

"And you will understand, sir, that at my age one is not always . . . that one . . . Oh, sir ! She went into the cathedral."

"Oh, she went into the cathedral."

"Do you know her ?"

"I will not say that. But, to oblige you, I will enquire of my daughter."

"You will. . . . Oh !"

The merchant went into the house. The young man did not ask who this daughter was who was familiar with the secrets of his heart. He was content to be wrapped in the veils of mystery once more. He clasped his temples with both hands, took two headlong strides, and trembled all over.

"Oh, Alba ! Oh, sweet morning light !"

The merchant reappeared.

"My daughter knows perfectly whom you mean, but she will not tell you."

"Why not?"

"My daughter knows that too."

"But the woman looked at me! She turned round, just by the cathedral door, and she looked at me, at me only."

"She looked at you, did she?"

The young man stamped on the ground.

"What does all this matter to any one save myself, only myself! What does your daughter want! But she knows nothing at all, your daughter!"

"Ho, ho!"

The merchant lost his air of unconcern.

"If my daughter knows nothing, then you have been dreaming, young man, and nothing at all happened. But, if anything did happen, she knows it."

"Then why doesn't she tell me?"

"Is she to send in pursuit of this unfortunate woman a man who will seduce her? My daughter does not look with favour on such things. But as to knowing? Oh, she knows everything."

"Sir"—Nello's voice had a wheedling note. "Look, I have a beautiful ring. You are a merchant. You will know the value of this ruby. Shall I tell you for what price I will let you have it? For the name, sir, for the name!"

"Let me see it!"

Mancafede seized the young man by the finger and drew him under the lamp before the cathedral. Suddenly he looked up, frowning heavily above the horn rims of his glasses.

"Where did you get that ring, young man?"

Nello blushed deeply, drew back his finger and walked away murmuring:

"I am unworthy of her! I am still wearing the ring I had from the jeweller's wife!"

And he retreated into the darkness.

But it did not remain dark. From the Corso, across the Square and toward the Town Gate, dashed a crowd of urchins, holding candles in paper lanterns and screaming :

“ They’re coming ! There are some more coming ! ”

At once the shutters all round clattered against the walls, and light streamed from the windows. Out of the houses poured an inquisitive crowd, still wiping their mouths. They collected outside the gate, pointed towards it and joined in the clamour. Beyond the gate the sound of laughter, shouting, singing and thumping grew louder and louder. . . . And, amid rattling and clattering and bawling, a fantastic vehicle, full of shrieking women and surrounded by the boys with their lanterns, drove on to the Square before the eyes of the stupefied crowd. In a moment the young men were standing round with outstretched arms, nothing but swaying arms, and on all sides of the coach, gaudy skirts and blouses caught the wind as the girls jumped down into the men’s upraised arms—recklessly, shutting their eyes, as though plunging into space. Then the male passengers clambered down.

“ The chorus has come ! ” yelled the crowd, and those who had remained indoors came down on to the Square. The Café was now brilliantly illuminated. Serafini, the confectioner in the Corso, must have opened his shop again, for his ice-cream cart was jingling across the Square. Lawyer Belotti forced his way through ; he was panting.

“ We have lodgings, ladies ; we are the committee.”

“ We are the committee,” shouted the boys mockingly.

The lawyer only waved his list aloft the more excitedly. The tailor, Chiaralunzi, and young Savezzo shouted to their friends to bring along the musical instruments.

“ God help me ! ” screamed an old woman, who was

being crushed to death ; and the wife of Pipistrelli, the verger, cried :

" The world is coming to an end ; Don Taddeo was right. Oh, what sinners we are ! "

The *Café Progresso* was packed to overflowing.

" Friend Achilles ! A black punch ! " cried those in front ; but the proprietor of the *Café* was imprisoned behind his bar, and could not even thrust his paunch above it. He filled the glasses and they were passed along from hand to hand. He worked himself into a fever of excitement and shouted in his booming voice :

" One free glass for every three ! "

Outside, his son, handsome Alfo, was being jostled to and fro by the crowd, and could not make his way back. He smiled fatuously whenever he met a woman, but as he threw a kiss to little Rina, the servant of Polli, the tobacconist, he was cuffed from behind. He had trodden on some one's foot. It was the tenor, Nello Gennari, who was leaning against the wall in Lucia's alley, and biting his lip in the darkness. Handsome Alfo politely begged his pardon.

" It's all because there are so many girls here, sir. It's a terrible business if one is handsome."

The tenor looked at him.

" It must be a fine life," he said, laughing aloud, " if one is handsome."

" Not always, sir. For they all want to marry one, and I intend to marry none but the most beautiful : Alba Nardini, the beautiful Alba."

" What is the name of the most beautiful ? "

Here the music blared out, as though all the horns would burst. Handsome Alfo gave a parting nod, and was borne away by a movement of the crowd. They all surged forward and began to revolve round the music. The town was dancing ; all through the night it was filled with tumult and revelry and dancing. Nello

Gennari, his head sunk between his shoulders, wringing his outstretched hands, passed very slowly down the poultry-woman's alley.

“ Her name is Alba ! ”

Suddenly he dropped down and pressing his breast and his face against the moist, black wall, he wept at the wonder of it.

II

AT five o'clock, before the heat of the day, lawyer Belotti started for his morning walk, already attired in his black coat, which stood out in a point behind. According to his custom, he was crossing the garden of the Palazzo Torroni, in order to reach the high road, when Saverio, the Baron's steward, valet and gardener, emerged from behind one of the pillars of the entrance, and placing his hand to his mouth, called softly :

"Lawyer Belotti !"

"What's the matter, Saverio ?"

As the servant spoke in a whisper, the lawyer did the same.

"The Baron was out all night. He is still out."

"Oh, these sportsmen. Sport, my friend, is a passion ; one gets absolutely carried away by it. Only to instance my own case . . ."

"But, lawyer, it isn't a question of sport. He went into the *Albergo Luna*, and he hasn't yet come out of it."

The lawyer opened his mouth and raised his forefinger.

"Dear me !" he said—and he began to laugh, at first noiselessly, and then a hoarse rattling laugh ending in a cough and a spit. When he had recovered himself, he said, opening his eyes very wide :

"Is there going to be a scandal, Saverio ?"

And he held out his cigarette case.

"The Baroness is asleep. I have tumbled about all the things in the Baron's room, to make it look as though he had made an early start ; and I spent the night by the front door."

"What should we do without you, Saverio ! Let us hope he won't go too far and that he will get home before every one is about. I will be off, so that no one may see us together. Not a word of this to any one, Saverio."

The lawyer retreated from the house. He had forgotten his morning walk ; the scene of remarkable events was demanding his presence. Hurried footsteps sounded behind him in the Corso : Don Taddeo. The lawyer greeted him cordially :

"A fine morning, Reverendo ?"

The priest stared at him with his red eyes, drew his cassock more closely about his lean frame as though to avoid a possible contact and in a trice had vanished round the corner. The lawyer gazed after him.

"He barely touched his cap. Does he know— ? And he's hand and glove with the Baroness. We shall have a scandal."

With more than wonted briskness he waddled down the still silent Corso, and, opposite the last window of the cathedral, whisked suddenly round the corner, where the road turned down towards the inn. There it lay, still half asleep, in its small straw-littered square, with stables to the left, vine-clad arbour to the right, and the fountain trickling nearby. In the second storey a window was open. "Fancy that," mused the lawyer, "they like fresh air. But now it's time to wake up." He bent down, picked up a pebble, and threw it at the window, panting heavily. "Evidently they're tired out, and no doubt they know why." As he was picking up another pebble, Baron Torrioni himself, accompanied by the landlord, Malandrini, appeared at the gate of the inn. As usual, the Baron was wearing his brown check shooting costume ; his gun was slung over his shoulder, and he was emptying off a large glass of wine.

"Ah, Baron !" cried the lawyer at once. "What a fine, healthy occupation yours is ! If only I were not

chained to my office——. And where are you off to this glorious morning? To the meadows in search of larks? Or probably to the mountains after wild boars?"

"I came," explained the other, "to fetch the young man who is staying here, the singer——"

"Signor Gennari," finished the host. "I'll see that he doesn't keep you waiting, Baron. Don't worry!"

"He promised to be ready in a moment. Meanwhile, I'll go on in front."

He pressed the lawyer's soft palm and hurriedly disappeared.

The landlord cleared his throat cautiously.

"Do you see that open window?"

The lawyer winked.

"He never went home," said the landlord. "He wasn't home all night."

"Ah! And isn't that the window?"

Malandrini winked.

"No, the other, next to it. The young lady is still sleeping."

"She needs to, no doubt. Oh! that Baron!"

"A real nobleman," remarked the landlord.

They gazed at one another with sparkling eyes.

"And the other one," resumed the lawyer, "the actor? Is he abroad too? His case perhaps is even more sensational? My friend, I begin to suspect that we in this town are on the eve of events——"

The landlord sighed. Then rubbing his hands:

"One good thing about it is that we shall have a little excitement. . . . Excuse me; I want to lay the table in the arbour myself. My wife won't be down yet. She's still asleep; for an extraordinary thing happened to her. I woke up in the night and had just discovered that she was not by my side when she entered the room looking as if she hadn't slept all night and told me that

the ghost of her father had summoned her away ; the ghost insisted that I should not be disturbed ; very considerate, wasn't it ? ”

“ Mere feminine superstition,” said the lawyer angrily. “ How much longer are we going to entrust those nuns with the education of our women. You surely don't believe that foolish story, Malandrini ? ”

“ How should I know ! Women have a great many experiences of which we men know nothing. One has to be patient.”

“ But tell me now, this girl ! The very first night ! Would you have believed it, Malandrini ”

“ Why not ? ” asked the landlord, becoming heated. “ Is the *Albergo Luna* a nunnery ? And after all what will any one know ? Only what you tell them, lawyer.”

“ Oh ! ”

The lawyer laid his hand on his heart.

“ The priest seems to have good grounds for not wishing to let loose the actors among his flock,” he said, as he turned thoughtfully away. “ One must admit that men of his cloth understand human nature.”

“ If you are making for the road,” cried Malandrini after him, “ why don't you use the garden gate ? ”

“ You are right ”—and the lawyer turned back. “ One must stick to one's regular habits. Not six times during the last twenty-seven years have I missed my morning walk, and I hope to take it for another twenty-seven years.”

He made his way down through the vineyard behind the house and reached the road below, which was still thickly dappled by the shadows of the plane trees ; then, taking off his hat, he began to wipe his head. “ They have no air like this in their towns, these artists. . . . Evidently the Baron knows how to tackle their women. They say that when he was an officer——. It's rumoured that he has a child in Rondone. . . . But

after all, what is there in that? Why, when one considers, it's quite possible that I too. . . . Truc, Andreina has never been very particular about her virtue, but that boy of hers grows more like me every year . . . as far as it's possible for a peasant to be like me. Then I simply flung Andreina down in the cornfield. Actresses have to be treated in exactly the same way."

He stopped, looked anxiously round, as though in search of a suitable place, and mopped his forehead once more. Below him the pale silvery foliage of the olive trees stretched in terraces down to and beyond the river, which wound between their dark roots like a gleaming ribbon. In the far distance the already sunbaked plain, with its olive trees and its scattered, whitewashed farmsteads, melted into a sea of blue haze. Above, the town gazed down upon him from its glittering window-panes, its walls with their cypress-bordered gap and the black arches of its gates.

"Where can this tenor be hiding? For, let us face the truth, he has certainly spent the night at some house in the town. Only to think that he may have been with the wife of one of my friends—who must be a very sound sleeper. How if it were Polli? He snores loud enough. Last autumn he even snored through the earthquake! Perhaps he will show it in his face. One ought to be able to read that in a man's face! Ah yes, a bachelor's life has its advantages. Now in any of those houses up there the actor may play his pranks, but in mine he certainly won't play them. . . . And Camuzzi? How about Camuzzi?" The lawyer's face darkened as he thought of his enemy, the municipal secretary.

"No one deserves it more than he, the impudent ignoramus! Ah yes, my friend, for all your disdainful smiles, we shall see the horns sprouting on your forehead!"

The lawyer drew a deep breath of contentment.

"It really is a very beautiful morning."

"But unfortunately," he reflected further, "little Signora Camuzzi seems quite contented. When Severino Salvatori wanted to take her for a drive in his basket carriage, she answered: not even across the Square to the cathedral door! And yet her mother was to have been there. But Camuzzi's wife is modest and proud; she looks at no one and only goes to church. Soon she'll be one of Don Taddeo's body-guard. . . . No," the lawyer had to admit, "there's not much hope in that quarter."

He drew himself up again immediately.

"But there are others who are not to be despised, and I for my part should have no objection if the doctor's wife——. Ah! now she has immoral instincts; that's quite evident. For in the first place she is too fat to be virtuous. And once it is plain that she is bestowing favours on the actor—for, after all, are there not other men just as good as the actor? When I come to think of it, I've long had designs on her. Her husband shall see that the sugar which he professed to have discovered in my system is no obstacle where that sort of thing is concerned. Sugar, no matter how little, in a man like me! And I am to take steps to get rid of it! The doctor shall see what steps I am going to take! Ha, ha!"

He rubbed his hands, wheeled round, and laughing and panting he started to climb the road back to the town. Then he became reflective: the aspect of the town was utterly changed. Only yesterday a number of things would have been regarded as impossible. Of course certain things happened in the town such as happened everywhere. Apart from the house in the Via Tripoli: every one knew the laundry-women up the hill; and the lawyer himself was particularly well informed concerning the widow of a municipal customs

official who professed to do up millinery. Then there were the rumours concerning Mama Paradisi and old Mancafede ; and recently there had been some whispering about Signora Malandrini and Baron Torroni—which, since the morning, the lawyer was inclined to discredit. But now it was not a case of this or that woman. Since this actor had taken the field, hardly a single member of the female population seemed unattainable ; how delicious if at the very moment when Baron Torroni was deceiving his wife with that girl, she herself was giving him tit for tat with the tenor ! The lawyer became inventive ; his imagination took wings and transformed the town into his happy hunting ground. He himself followed hard upon the actor into every bedroom. Before that of the Baroness he had to overcome a deep-rooted shyness ; but finally, with a snap of the fingers, he frolicked into that too.

Rejuvenated by his fancy, he had hurried on without noticing how his arms were swinging and how the sweat was dripping from under his wig. All at once, behind the public laundry and half way to Villascura, he found himself confronted with the actor himself. The latter bade him good morning and was about to saunter past, when the lawyer called out, gasping for breath :

“ Oh, so there you are, are you ! ”

“ Here I am, at your service,” assented the tenor.

“ That is to say ”—the lawyer’s sallow face wore a cynical smile, “ who knows upon whose service you are here.”

“ What do you mean ? ” asked the young man, his face suddenly taking on a threatening expression.

“ Nothing, oh, nothing. I see that you are going for a walk, Signor Gennari. You are up early. It is, you must know, my little vanity to be the first out of doors every morning ; but what is it for a man of your years

to rise now and again at five in the morning from the bed in which he has passed a glorious night."

"My night," said the tenor in a tone of hostile reserve, "was very far from glorious. Yesterday evening I felt a longing to go for a walk and somehow I wandered from the road. Then, as you know, the sky became overcast ; I could not find my way back, and I spent the night down there in the vineyards. Look at the earth on my clothes."

The lawyer turned him round and made a careful inspection.

"That is amazing."

Then he assumed an air of indifference.

"So you have had a good rest. And now let me suggest that you accompany me, sir. I will show you our country. You passed Villascura, I think ? "

"I don't know what you mean, sir. I have already told you that I was down yonder."

The lawyer gazed at him reproachfully ; then silently drew out his pocket-mirror and held it before the other's face.

"What do you mean by that ? " asked the tenor, but he looked into the glass—and he found that his eyes were even darker than he could have wished, for there were circles round them and his face was very pale. The warmth had faded from his clear marble pallor, and the black, waving hair above his forehead, the eyebrows and the full red mouth stood out vividly against the dead whiteness.

"I don't mean to say," said the lawyer, "that an air of exhaustion does not suit you. The good looks of you young fellows are proof against the exertions of your nights. Alas for us older men ! But what I was driving at was this : A quiet sleep on the soft earth of the vineyards in the warm night air would hardly have reduced you to such a plight."

Before the other could make an angry retort, he stretched out both hands :

"It is clear that you regard me as your enemy. No, sir, I am not your enemy. On the contrary, I am all in favour of young people amusing themselves, especially if they are artists. And after all what does it matter to me, since I am a bachelor. Possibly my married friends will not carry their approval quite so far"—and the lawyer again hazarded a smile.

"That is to say, I am your friend, sir, and if you were to confide to me—as a gentleman you will not, of course—in which of the houses in our town you spent last night, you could rely upon lawyer Belotti."

The tenor's face suddenly relaxed, and became tranquil and even indifferent.

"Oh yes," he said, "in the town, you think—. Well, why not?"

And his laugh rang out light and clear as the note of a bell.

The lawyer rubbed his hands.

"There, you see? We are beginning to understand each other. For that matter, how could two men like ourselves fail to understand each other, when it is a case of women."

"You are right!" and the tenor laughed still more loudly. The lawyer wagged his forefinger.

"Ah! you rascal! You like our town, do you? It is small, but that does not hinder us from being gay and modish in our way of life. Our women! Well we are talking as man to man, aren't we?"

"To be sure! Pray go on!"

"If I may venture! Just one thing: I am sure that I too know the woman with whom you spent last night."

"I am convinced of it!" exclaimed the tenor, and he laughed almost hysterically.

The lawyer had worked himself into a fever. He gesticulated with both hands.

"You would be amazed if I were to tell you the truth about myself and about the younger generation of our best families."

He had come to a halt, and he stared at the young man with wide-open, unblinking eyes.

"You are wonderful," declared the tenor emphatically, and they walked on. When the lawyer had recovered his breath :

"I must not forget to buy some eggs at Villascura."

"Why do you keep harping on this Villascura?"

"Oh ! Now you're once more as gloomy as the name of the villa. Don't you like it ? I go there regularly for eggs, so as to avoid the town customs. I am going to fetch two dozen for my sister."

"But I see no sign of this Villascura. How much further have we to go?"

"Just wait until the road bends round the mountain ! —and in the meantime take a look at these beautiful fields of maize and the olive groves stretching down into the valley : they belong, sir, to the villa which you dislike so much. Signor Nardini is our biggest oil-producer : three hundred hectolitres a year. Although he is my political opponent, I will not deny that he understands his business and is thereby a benefactor to the neighbourhood. As for his views, they are deplorable. The pigheaded old man is the mainstay of the clerical party in this district. Incidentally he had an opportunity five years ago of becoming minister ! The only condition was that he should give his granddaughter in marriage to the nephew of Macelli, a big swell and a member of the Chamber of Deputies ; and the plan fell through because Nardini is determined that Alba shall be shut up in a convent. What made you start ?"

"I didn't start. A stone hurt me. These shoes are no good for the country."

"But our roads are good ! They are district

roads—and only seven years ago the government spent nearly a hundred thousand lire on repairing them.”

The lawyer fired out the big figure like a cannon ball.

“Moreover, as regards the parish roads, upon my suggestion and against the advice of the municipal secretary, the municipality and the Principessa Cipolla jointly——”

“Is there a convent here then?” asked the tenor.

“Why? The Principessa, whose property in this district I have the honour of administering, lives in the great world—in Rome, sir, and in Paris. . . . But of course we have a convent too, though we would gladly exchange it for something else; and I will show it to you. Are you wanting to practise your wiles on those holy petticoats? Oh! he sticks at nothing. But do at least tell me one thing: your last night’s lady was fat, wasn’t she?”

“Who knows?”

“For I am a connoisseur in such matters: you are just the type for fat women—who, by the bye, offer the least resistance, as every one knows. But here we are in front of the villa which you thought undiscoverable. And since you are in the company of lawyer Belotti you may venture, sir, to push open the gate and breathe in the scent of the roses.”

The lawyer stopped short and panted noisily.

“Isn’t it like a dream? At the end of this alley of roses and cypresses the silent, mysterious house with its central block and its two projecting wings, nestling in a greenish twilight beneath the mountain side! Do not object that such a northward-facing position is unhealthy. I know that too well, but what poetry in this damp, sweet-scented shade, with the rustling waterfall—above which, by the bye, pray note our new electric power station—and its wealth of flowers. Oh, sir! Flowers, music and women!”

Suddenly he put his hands to his mouth and began to bawl through them :

“ Hi ! Niccolo ! the eggs ! ”

While the boy was approaching, the lawyer unwound a long string bag.

“ See that they are new-laid, Niccolo ! And the right number—two dozen ! ”

He shouted again :

“ Signora Artemisia has not forgotten that chicken which once came on to our table in one of your eggs.”

Then he gripped the tenor under the arm.

“ Come along, my friend ! Why so bashful ? In my company you may feel at home here.”

Nello Gennari strove to overcome his agitation. He was startled at the bright hues of the roses, which had been veiled in darkness when he had knelt there the night before. The house yonder between its two wings had been as black as the night air, and in that corner had lingered the faint, soft light to which he had prayed.

The lawyer guided him along the side of the house towards a white balustrade. Drops fell from the bushes as he brushed against them in mounting the steps, and as his nostrils breathed in the scent of the ancient cypresses, wrapped in their eternal shade, he shuddered as though before a tomb. The great trees ascended the mountain in pairs like a troop of melancholy pilgrims, here and there broken by ravines and becoming frailer and more infrequent as they neared the summit. Above, an almost windowless edifice, which seemed to merge with the grey mountain side, looked down from its perpendicular height upon the villa below, watchful and menacing.

“ The convent,” explained the lawyer. “ They can see it from the windows of the house and exchange greetings with the holy petticoats. And they do it too,

for it is part of the family ; every woman of this household finally mounts the road to the other."

He led the young man a little further and whispered :

" The old man's wife died up there. Oh, no one can vouch for the truth of these stories, but she is said to have run away from him with an officer, and when she came back, sick and repentant, he sent her up there. . . . His daughter took the same path after her husband's death, and died soon after. Why do all the people here die ? Why are they all so melancholy and so thick with the priests ? The shade is to blame, for the sun only just touches the edge of the garden at noon ; and, whatever folk may say, life in perpetual shadow is bad for the blood and the character. Shall I give you an example ? Go down to Spello. It lies in the sun. All the men there have tenor voices, and all the women are fat and handsome. Opposite, on the north side, lies Lacise. Well, sir, at Lacise the women are sallow and dirty, and the men are a pack of robbers."

" Quite so, quite so. But you were saying that every woman of that household——"

" Ends in the convent "—and the lawyer banished all hope with a wave of his outspread hand.

" But at the present day——"

Nello had to gulp down a lump in his throat.

" —people are more enlightened, are they not ? "

Then, as the lawyer only snorted :

" Moreover a lonely old man will not part with his daughter earlier than need be."

" Need be ? Then you don't know which a fanatic of his sort needs most : the love of a daughter or the blessing of the priests ? Oh ! sir ! it is only too certain that we in this town are about to suffer a grievous loss and that one of our richest heiresses is in the most criminal fashion to be exiled from the world, from civic society, from family life and from public usefulness ! "

The face of the stranger suddenly grew sombre and scornful.

"No doubt many a man has already cherished hopes of her? And in your town you probably have some social circle in which Alba as a young woman would have danced and recited poetry? And have had lovers? Perhaps even yourself, lawyer?"

"Oh! one never knows," wheezed Belotti, throwing out his chest. The young man turned round and burst out laughing:

"The convents too want to live; and up there she will at any rate be alone and free!"

Ah! Better a thousand times that he should know her to be vanished, buried up there, than living among vulgar people in vulgar places, in vulgar arms! "She will be pure," he thought, as the lawyer surveyed him with a sense of disappointment—and then, trembling and grief-stricken: "I shall never see her again, but neither will any other man see her again."

Then he took a hasty step back and seized the railing.

"What's the matter?" asked the lawyer in alarm. The tenor pressed his hand to his heart and made no reply. The lawyer followed his troubled glance, which was directed towards the open door on the terrace.

"Hullo! Niccolo! There you are," he called, as the boy came towards them with the bulging string bag.

"Ah, you are easily startled, young man"—the lawyer clapped Nello on the shoulder. "You have nerves, like all artists. And we know the reason why."

He winked and gave the tenor another clap on the back. Nello drew away. He leant over the balustrade and closed his eyes. It might have been she! What would happen if he saw her again! That night spent so near to her, among things that were hers, had sufficed to fill him with an ecstasy that ended in exhaustion.

He descended into the garden, unmarked by the other two, who were quarrelling over the price of the eggs. Was not this the bench on which he had rested and on which she too, doubtless, was wont to sit? In the darkness he had felt the path for the print of her foot-step; he had cooled his hand upon it, and pressed it with his lips. Where was the footprint now?

"Did my fancy cheat me? Oh, and I flattered myself that the night wind was wafting me the perfume of her chamber, her perfume, and what I smelt was merely this beetroot. I am a fool; I am ridiculous. Did I not dream of dying on the steps of this fountain and of being discovered by her in the morning when she sought the coolness of its waters? Now it is already hot, I am thirsty, and here beneath her window, I feel so far from her and so alone."

He saw his anguished eyes reflected in the bowl from which he drank; he heard the dull thud of his footsteps on the pavement of the cypress avenue, and he found once more the little gate which in the dead of night he had lifted from its hinges so that it should not creak. He strode swiftly away down the high road; and as he went he flung out his arms again and again and shook his head.

When lawyer Belotti caught him up, Nello was looking about him distractedly. Where was he?

"My poor young friend, you must have grown deaf; I yelled and yelled but you only hurried on the faster. . . ."

As the tenor did not apologise, the lawyer did so. He had kept his companion waiting, but if he only knew how pernicky his sister was about the eggs—and he balanced the string bag in his hand.

"I have to pay for the bad ones. Oh, these women! But take a look at the municipal laundry! It was I who suggested it, and once again I got my way in spite

of that *ignoramus*, Camuzzi. It was a satisfaction to me to be able to labour in the interests of the women, and they are grateful to me for it. They praise me everywhere as a public benefactor. Good day, Fania, good day, Nana ! ”

Nonoggi, the barber, approached them. He swayed as he walked, bending over towards the left side. In his right hand he was holding his shabby leather bag, and he swung it with every stride, keeping his left arm quite stiff. When they were still some distance off, he lifted his hat, waved it, grimaced and cried in his shrill voice

“ Good morning, gentlemen ! What a splendid day. Who would die on such a day as this ! ”

“ We have no intention of dying,” retorted the lawyer. “ Are you on your way to Nardini ? Give him my compliments. I have already been at his house this morning on business.”

“ You are badly shaved, sir,” said the barber to Nello Gennari. “ That won’t please the women. If you would just seat yourself on this stone — it is in the shade — I would attend to you immediately. . . . You prefer not ? That is a mistake. Well, we shall meet another time. Your servant, gentlemen ! ”

The lawyer called him back. He waited until the barber had come quite near ; then he looked round and said in a half-whisper :

“ Nonoggi, have you seen the baron ? . . . So have I, Nonoggi. Something has happened already between him and that actress who is staying at the *Luna*. . . . ”

“ Ah ! Ah ! ”

The little man opened and shut his lack-lustre eyes. His limbs twitched, and the blood danced through the network of small blood-vessels that covered his face.

“ Nonoggi,” continued the lawyer, “ we must be

very discreet in this matter. Consider what an old family it is. You know what has occurred, but I beg that you will hold your tongue."

Before the other had finished speaking, the barber's hand was already on his heart ; he hopped and bowed and pursed his lips and stretched out the hand holding the bag.

"What a sad thing it is," he said, "when even gentlemen forget themselves. In others one likes to see it. But we will be dumb. Oh ! you know me, lawyer, as well as I know you."

"Else we shall have nothing more nor less than a scandal, Nonoggi—although it is a pardonable offence. But we have to reckon with people like that priest."

"Indeed we do reckon with them, lawyer ! Else what would become of ourselves ? Should we always be able to resist the weakness of the flesh ? For, as regards barbers in particular, they all have ugly wives. It is strange, it is puzzling, but it is a fact."

He spread out his hand.

"Do not laugh, sir !"—he turned to the tenor—"for I am speaking the plain truth. When we marry our wives, they seem to us beautiful, and afterwards they are ugly. You have only to look at the families of all the barbers in this town—Bonometti's wife, Druso's, Marcola's or my own. No ! you prefer not to look at them. I myself never look at them now, for fear of wearing them out."

He grinned until his mouth almost reached his left ear, waved his hat and bag and hurried on.

While they were still laughing, the lawyer's eyes fell on the town gate ; he pulled himself together and hid the bag of eggs beneath the skirt of his coat. He did not hurry.

"It's always better to keep up appearances. But they know me and no one would dare——"

The official at the customs office raised two fingers to his feathered hat. The lawyer said graciously :

" Good day, Cicogna."

And to his companion, with a touch of condescension :

" There, you see ? "

Whistling under his breath he drew out the eggs from beneath his coat.

But in the street the people turned round to look at them, and between the shutters of the windows the lawyer more than once saw eager eyes peering down from white faces at his companion. The latter did not raise his head, but the lawyer took the handsome young man by the arm and began to talk and laugh, bending towards him as though on terms of the closest intimacy. As they approached the Square and passed through the *portici* of the Town Hall young Signora Camuzzi appeared on the balcony of the second storey. In front of her she was holding a large fur rug, which she shook, singing softly. Suddenly she dropped it.

" Oh ! Pardon me, lawyer, I had not noticed you."

" Don't mind me ! It's an honour," cried the lawyer, at the same time starting back to escape the floating cloud of dust. Signora Camuzzi remained bent over the rug, which was now spread across the railing of the balcony ; she was flushed and she gazed steadily into the eyes of the lawyer's companion. The tenor raised his hat. She returned the greeting slowly and very gravely. The lawyer sneezed after they had passed through the cloud of dust. Before they reached the Café, he stopped once more and whispered, beating time with his finger :

" Consider for a moment : Would it not be really shameful if an ignoramus like Camuzzi had such a wife and was not deceived by her sooner or later ? But wives are so faithful nowadays ; and she in particular is the most faithful of them all."

At this moment the lean figure of Cavaliere Giordano,

the old tenor, emerged from the gate of the Town Hall. He was dressed in white as on the previous day, and the pouches under his eyes were even more conspicuous. He lifted his hand to his hat—slowly, so that the diamond had time to sparkle.

“ Ah ! Cavaliere.”

The lawyer rushed up to him. He panted in the old man's ear : “ You have the good fortune, Cavaliere, to lodge with one of our prettiest women. We expect of a man like yourself that he will not waste such an opportunity ! All eyes are turned towards you ! ”

The old man nodded carelessly, as though implying that the matter did not need so many words—but the lawyer had recoiled a few steps and was bending back his head.

“ Is it possible ! What do I see ! What does it mean ! ”

“ Don't you know ? ” asked Cavaliere Giordano.
“ It is an arc lamp.”

“ So I see only too well,” said the lawyer in a hollow voice, “ an arc lamp. But an arc lamp, sir, which has been put up without my knowledge. It must have been done overnight, and in this I perceive the hand of Camuzzi. He took advantage of the moment when I was devoting myself to the service of art. A public man, sir, a statesman cannot be too much on the alert.”

From Lucia's alley, with firm stride and one hand in his trouser pocket, emerged Gaddi, the baritone. He planted his thick-set person by the side of the others and said in his deep, metallic voice :

“ So we are the first up ? Nello, of course, as the result of some escapade, I because my family give me no peace—and at the Cavaliere's age one no longer needs much sleep.”

Old Giordano made a grimace. Gaddi raised his massive Cæsar-like profile, gazed at the buildings round,

and declared that it was an interesting town. Lawyer Belotti implored the actors to let him be their guide ; they would not regret it, for he was a specialist in the history of the town, and the materials for a great work had been lying on his writing-table for the last twenty years.

First he read out to the actors the Latin inscriptions of the ancient marble tablets on the façade of the Town Hall. To enable them to read one that was very high up, the lawyer made them climb on to the shoulders of a youth whom he summoned for that purpose. He even urged old Giordano to do the same and gaped in astonishment when the old man refused. The town was founded before Rome ! For centuries a temple of Venus had occupied the site of the Square.

"The whole Square ! For ours was one of the most noted sanctuaries of the goddess, and her votaries flocked to it from all parts of Italy."

The three men listened. The baritone remarked :

"That must have been a splendid business."

"Ah !" exclaimed the lawyer in a tone of mournful rapture, as though he himself had witnessed the passing of that time. "Very different from the present time, when the town only——"

Putting his hand to his mouth :

"—draws a small revenue from the house in the Via Tripoli."

The three men nodded silently.

"Oh, a wretched trifle ! But in former days : picture to yourselves, gentlemen, the army of priestesses in the gardens which covered all these slopes !"

From the expressions of all three, it was evident that they were picturing to themselves the priestesses. Nello Gennari's eyes were wide open and his mouth was bitter.

"Their dwellings stretched as far as Villascura.

Indeed we have evidence that the houses of the most distinguished of these ladies were situated at Villascura."

He tittered hoarsely ; Cavaliere Giordano sniggered slightly, and Gaddi laughed his deep, metallic laugh. The young tenor bit his lip and fixed his eyes on the ground.

"Now you know," added the lawyer, "from what gifted mothers our women are sprung."

Thereupon he led his eagerly expectant listeners through the courtyard of the Town Hall to the Valvassore madonna.

"Our great cinquecentist presented her to his native town. Pray observe the delicacy of the colouring !"

But though the lawyer lit one match after another, the strangers could only discern something black and crumbling behind the wire grating. Before their enthusiasm had time to wane he insisted that they must see the wooden bucket, which the citizens of the town stole from the citizens of Adorna three hundred years before. A mighty war had broken out between the two towns in consequence. Both had staked blood and wealth on this bucket. The gods, it was said, had joined in the conflict, being divided between the two armies.

"And we, with the aid of Pallas Athene, retained it, and it hangs in our belfry tower," concluded the lawyer. "You shall see, you shall see !"

He hurried in front of them across the Square. Coming into violent collision with the post of the arc lamp, he looked up angrily.

"It's in the wrong place. I should not have put it there !"

When they had reached the other side, he paused, turned half round and said in a low tone :

"That black house in the corner, by the side of the tower. Pray don't look at it ; we are observed."

He drew them round the corner of the tower and whispered in the ear of each in turn : " Behind there is one of our principal curiosities, the mystery, the enigma of the town : a miracle the fanatics would say."

And he told them about Evangelina Mancafede, who had not been outside the house for nine years but saw and knew everything in the town.

" Amazing," said the baritone.

" A bad business," said Nello between clenched teeth.

" Not only that," added the lawyer, " but she knew beforehand, Cavaliere, that you were coming !"

The old singer looked grave. That sort of thing might bring ill luck.

" It was prophesied to me that I should die in a town which had less than a hundred thousand inhabitants, surrounded by mystery. So I have to be careful."

" You look as though you could never die," said Gaddi, with a glance at the old man's rouged cheeks.

" Fame makes men immortal," cried the lawyer, and he pushed back the door of the tower. They mounted a slippery staircase, one behind the other. In front of a door with iron clamps, the lawyer stopped, stretched out one arm above the others and impressed upon them the solemnity of the occasion.

" In the history of the bucket, you, gentlemen, who serve glory, will find a great example. For the sake of this bucket many brave men died. What is a life ? The bucket endures ! Glory never dies !"

" Bravo ! Bravo !" shouted all three. Old Giordano's eyes were moist.

" But we must get the key," remarked the lawyer, and he called up into the tower :

" Hi ! Ermenegilda !"

His voice echoed emptily. The lawyer mounted another three steps, shouting from each one of them. Finally a grim old face looked down from above.

"What do you want? The key isn't here. No one is to be allowed to see the bucket any more."

"What's that? Are you crazy, Ermenegilda? Can't you see who I am? I am lawyer Belotti."

"I know that. But Don Taddeo has the key."

"What's that you say? Don Taddeo has——. But this is downright impertinence! This is daylight robbery! Gentlemen, you are the witnesses of an outrage. You shall be present when I report what has occurred to the municipality. Oh! words fail me."

The lawyer had thrown up his hands. Then he plunged forward—almost precipitating the three actors down the staircase—and hurried with flying coat-tails out of the tower, between the motionless lions, up the steps and into the cathedral. The others ran after him.

"Lawyer," cried the baritone, "don't bother about it! We don't mind——"

The lawyer had already disappeared into the sacristy, but he rejoined them almost immediately.

"Do you imagine that this priest is anywhere to be seen? He is afraid, and he has reason to be. We shall see who is the stronger! This sort of thing shall not be allowed to continue. Evidently that place in there——"

He pointed to the sacristy.

"—is not only a factory of lies and intrigues, but also a den of robbers."

"After all, you too once stole the bucket," protested the baritone. The old tenor suggested:

"There is probably some mistake."

"Is it really so very important?" asked Nello Gennari.

Then, as the lawyer lifted up his arms:

"Besides, the priest may be in the right. The bucket is in his bell-tower . . ."

"Oh! Did you ever hear such sophistry. The bucket, the emblem of the town! The fruit of our

victory!—and to think that a priest should dare—
But I shall track him down ; he is in the school. Friends,
on with you to the school ! He shall suffer such a defeat
as he will never forget.”

They restrained him with difficulty. A crowd of boys collected round them. On the Square and in the streets that opened on to it the sounds of hammering and singing ceased, and the people came out on to their doorsteps. Acquistapace, the chemist, appeared on the scene. He suggested that Don 'Taddeo wanted to revenge himself because—and he pointed to the three singers—art was now flourishing in the town.

“It is an attack on me because I invited them,” maintained the lawyer. None the less he allowed himself to be persuaded to drink a glass of vermouth at the Café before opening hostilities. Polli and Camuzzi also made their appearance. Nonoggi, the barber, who accompanied them out of his shop, drew back as soon as he perceived the lawyer and at the same moment the lieutenant of the carabinieri drew near. The lawyer called upon the latter to take immediate and forcible measures to recover the key for the town. The municipal secretary declared that such a proceeding would be illegal.

“So you are going over to the priests ! I quite realised, Camuzzi, that you were no friend of progress. You even had that arc lamp set up overnight in a position where everybody collides with it, simply in order to annoy me. But I never imagined that you would sink as low as this.”

The secretary professed his entire impartiality. It was merely a question of competence, for if the bucket belonged to the town at any rate the tower in which it was suspended was the property of the church.

“Didn't I tell you so ?” remarked Nello Gennari.

The squabbling of these people and the importance which they attached to their paltry concerns filled him with a strange exasperation. He felt entitled to demand that a respectful silence should invest himself and his emotions. They might kill each other for all he cared !

"The priest is right !" he exclaimed in a shrill, angry voice. "After all, we must have religion."

The lawyer did not heed him. Suddenly his face beamed triumphantly.

"So you want logic ? You shall have it. Oh ! You shall have it."

With his finger to his nose :

"The bucket is suspended in the tower. Quite so, but it is suspended. It does not touch the ground, and the rope which connects it with the roof belongs to the town. I know that, for I bought it myself from the rope-maker, Fierabelli, because the old one did not seem to me quite safe. There, you see ! Neither above nor below nor around does the bucket impinge upon ecclesiastical territory, for could any one maintain that the air in which it is suspended belongs to the church ? "

"That remains to be decided," said Camuzzi, and Nello backed him up.

"You will not humbug me. The air is free. I can shoot as many birds as I like in the air above your vineyard, provided that I do not trample on your soil."

The lawyer raised his glass of vermouth to his mouth and blinked gleefully as he surveyed the crestfallen countenance of his adversary. His victory had soothed him.

"Keep your feet on the rungs of your chairs, gentlemen !" he cried jovially. "Then you won't catch any of our fleas. Ah ! On a beautiful morning like this one's head is clear, and it's a real pleasure to chat about one thing and another with one's fellow men. Women are no good for that."

Meanwhile they all bowed to Mama Paradisi, whose voluminous person was completely filling one of her windows. At the next appeared her two beautiful daughters.

"They are dressed already," said the chemist. "I wonder if that's for your benefit, Signor Gennari? No offence to the other gentlemen; in any case I don't take any credit for it."

The tenor looked away.

"You are spoilt, young man," and the old soldier laid his broad hand on the other's shoulder. Nello burst out:

"Ought women to be allowed to open their shutters in the daytime? Just look at them all round the Square, and they would like nothing better than to open their arms too. A woman who lacks modesty repels me; such is my nature."

"But, Nello!" said the baritone. "Up to now matters couldn't move fast enough for you. Only yesterday, within half an hour of our arrival, you were in pursuit of a woman who entered the cathedral."

"Who entered the cathedral? Pray hold your tongue! Perhaps you have been paid to offer me one of them?"

"What's come over you, Nello! This irritable fellow, gentlemen, has hitherto been a perfect cherubim and the joy of all the women in the towns where we have sung. He has never yet refused one of them anything. And now, what's happened to him?"

Old Giordano was throwing kisses in all directions.

"It leaves one no time for talking," he said. "There are too many of them."

"Why are the shutters closed on those houses?" he asked presently. As the eyes of the company turned towards the chemist, the latter confessed:

"The first one is mine. But Nonoggi's wife has her

shutters closed too, as you see, Cavaliere. That is to say, she too obeys the instructions of Don Taddeo, who would like to put a ban on art. Oh ! my wife is not the only one ; he has a whole party behind him. You will see."

" We will try conclusions with him ! " exclaimed the lawyer. " He shall give up the key. Even if it means that I have to devote the rest of my life to conducting lawsuits on behalf of the town, he shall give up the key. I myself, lawyer Belotti, will lead all your chorus ladies into the tower ; I will show them the bucket, and not St. Agapitus himself shall prevent me ! "

" Talk to your brother about it ! " suggested Camuzzi. " He has a good head, and here he comes ; it is ten o'clock."

The farmer, seated on his little ass between two large baskets, rode up the street by the side of the Town Hall. Arrived at the Town Hall, he took off, first his blue glasses, then his bell-shaped straw hat and waved both. He dismounted before the Café.

" Good day, friends," he said.

" The lawyer maintains . . ." began Camuzzi.

" I maintain nothing," said the lawyer quickly.

The farmer gazed at him pityingly.

" Ah, the lawyer. What is he wanting again so soon ? Pappappapp . . . "

He imitated in a spiteful tone the mode of speech of his distinguished brother. The lawyer leant back with an air of superiority.

" It is a matter upon which a man like yourself is incapable of forming an opinion."

" Very well, keep it to yourselves," replied Galileo.

" But who are those ? "—and he pointed with his finger to each of the three strangers in turn. Upon being introduced, he bowed ceremoniously, groaning intermittently, and, when he was once more seated in his

chair, relieved his feelings by a violent expectoration. He set his short, fat legs wide apart, and let his little golden-brown hands hang down between them. From beneath his white eyebrows he examined them all with blinking, contemptuous eyes, grimaced whenever they made a remark, and finally in a blustering tone, as though his patience was exhausted, demanded that his neighbour, since he was an artist, should treat them to some jokes or conjuring tricks. The old tenor stood up and protested. He had been an artist for fifty years, but such a request—— His whole face trembled, in every wrinkle, as though he was about to burst into tears, and as he gesticulated with his withered hands, it was clear that he had forgotten about the diamond.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Galileo.
 "What a blockhead! Pappappapp!"

His voice had the same grotesque intonation as when he had mimicked the lawyer. Cavaliere Giordano made a movement to withdraw. Again and again, with tender respect, the lawyer strove to dissuade him.

"Do not inflict such a misfortune upon us, Cavaliere! There is no city in which you enjoy greater fame than in ours. Do not misunderstand my brother; he too respects you. Galileo, our sister wants to see you; one of the goats is ill."

"Why didn't you say so at once? But you lawyers understand nothing."

He wiped his mouth with his hand, took hold of the little donkey, which was standing with its nose close against his neck, and led it up the steep alley. The lawyer resumed his entreaties.

"Cavaliere, a man like yourself is above such trifles. A peasant has failed to treat you with due respect. What else? For my brother is merely a peasant. He goes to bed at seven; at one o'clock at night he rides out into his fields, and at ten o'clock, when it is beginning

to get hot, he goes back home. In the interval he plays morra with men like himself. When we were under the Pope, he went to mass ; now, it is true, he goes no longer ; but his mind is none the less very uncultivated, and he gets Lucia, a crazy old woman who keeps poultry, to prophesy to him what sort of a harvest it will be. But——”

He loosed his hold of the singer.

“ Enough of these trivialities. It is a serious moment, Cavaliere. Gentlemen, I see the priest there in the Corso.”

He sat down, as though worn out by excitement. Old Giordano too resumed his seat. But once again he was overcome by his recollection of the insult. He collapsed in his chair and murmured : “ An artist for fifty years . . . ”

“ He has the Baroness Torroni with him,” said Polli.

“ As a protection,” added the lawyer.

“ What of that ? ”—and the lawyer leapt up. “ I shall simply inform the Baroness that I and this priest——”

“ He is saying good-bye ; she is going into the house.”

The old tenor burst out vehemently :

“ I, whom His Excellency Count Cavour made a knight of the Crown of Italy ! ”

They did not listen to him. The lawyer stood ready to pounce. Upon perceiving him, the priest started and changed his direction. The lawyer rushed forward and barred his passage.

“ Caught,” remarked the chemist.

“ And I have a house in Florence ! ”

Therewith Cavaliere Giordano wrathfully set down his glass.

“ Why should I be concerned about such trifles ? My house is filled with the reminders of a glorious career, with the presents of princes and ladies . . . ”

"Don Taddeo, your servant," the lawyer was heard to say.

He lifted his hat and made a little bow. The priest returned the greeting with equal courtesy and gazed at him with his red, burning eyes.

"One word, Don Taddeo, if it won't be troubling you ! An unfortunate mistake on your part . . ."

"It is not a mistake, sir . . ."—and they saw that the priest could hardly get out his words. "The key, for doubtless it is of that you wish to speak . . ."

"Quite so. And, relying upon your sense of honour—"

"No doubt. But the matter is simply this, sir : the key was so corroded with rust as to be hardly usable. I gave it to the locksmith, Fantapiè, and instructed him to make a new one."

"Ah !"

The lawyer's exclamation had a clear, triumphant ring. Evidently he was getting on famously. Polli, Acquistapace and the lieutenant repeated "Ah !"—and even the baritone gave vent to an "Ah !" Nello Gennari's eyes were riveted on Cavaliere Giordano. The famous singer had once more collapsed after his violent outbreak, and he looked old—old beyond all disguising, with hanging jaw, vacant, senile eyes and helpless hands. His young companion reflected as he gazed sombrely at the pitiful figure :

"Yes, why is he here ? A wealthy and respected old man—yet he condescends to visit this wretched hole to provide sport for a set of churls ! But his voice has gone ; they won't listen to him any longer in the big cities ; and since it seems that we artists cannot live without applause he has to content himself with the clapping of peasants' fists—just as a man may perhaps dazzle servant girls when the ladies will no longer look at him. . . . Such is our life. We drift on and on, as I too have been

drifting so long—childishly, contemptibly intoxicated, without an anchor, without the courage to step ashore—and then one day, outside the Café of a provincial town, where the fleas jump over one's feet, we perceive how far we have drifted. . . . But, as for myself: Oh, never shall it come to that with me. I am young, and my whole life shall belong to Alba. I will convince her of my devotion. I will do something, dare something, that shall win her for me. . . . Yes—from the convent; I will free her from the convent; how should she not love me! We shall flee; then we shall fling ourselves at her grandfather's feet. . . . Perhaps I am foolish and romantic? But nothing, even if I am never to possess her, nothing shall prevent me from living at her feet—as a peasant, unknown to her, beneath the walls of her cell. Or is there some monastery near by? On festival days we could gaze at one another in the church—her beautiful head swathed in its white bands, and I in a cowl; we could gaze into each other's eyes and sing . . .”

“Young man, you are dreaming,” said a voice—and Cavaliere Giordano, who had now recovered, contemplated Nello with a superior smile.

The lawyer and Don Taddeo had begun to take leave of one another. A semicircle of listeners followed their movements.

“So I can count on your word”—and the lawyer took a step backwards and bowed.

“Of course. At your service,” replied the priest, bending forward, cap in hand.

“It is always a good thing to come to an understanding,” said the lawyer, as he took another step. And Don Taddeo:

“We should hate no one.”

“Just what I think, Reverendo. Your servant.”

The lawyer bowed a second time.

With perspiring brow and eyes that as yet distinguished nothing, he returned to his seat. Bonometti, the barber, who was among the spectators, declared :

“ He gave it him, did the lawyer.”

The wife of Pipistrelli, the verger, thumped the pavement with her crutch-stick.

“ It was Don Taddeo who gave it to the lawyer ! ”

The boys whistled through their fingers behind the priest's back. When he turned round, they were engaged in innocent play.

“ There he lurks, the coward,” said the chemist, hardly lowering his voice. “ He is jabbering away to the locksmith.”

“ One must be firm with them,” said Polli. “ Every one knows that.”

“ By the bye, lawyer,” said Camuzzi, “ you were very polite to that fellow ; he can't complain.”

“ Polite ? I ? I spoke my mind quite plainly. Of course one must carry on a discussion in a civilised manner. . . . ”

“ You shouldn't have addressed him as Reverendo,” said the tobacconist, “ unless he called you Excellency at least.”

“ Why, what's happened to you all ? He, for his part, was quite conscious of my irony : that I'm sure of. He now knows that I consider him to be a rascal. Do you think he would have cringed before me as he did, if he had not had an uneasy conscience ? He was sweating with anxiety ! He would gladly have run away as soon as he saw me ! ”

“ That's true,” said the baritone, and the others agreed.

“ The victory is with the lawyer,” declared the lieutenant.

Acquistapace, the chemist, thumped the table.

"Bravo, lawyer ! On the day that he gives up the key, I will pay for two bottles of A——"

"Asti," he concluded, after he had gently withdrawn his hand from the table. His wife, with her black shawl round her head and shoulders, had come out of his shop, and her glance rested so heavily upon the old warrior that he quailed beneath it. She went up to Don Taddeo. The priest was standing by the fountain with Signora Nonoggi, the barber's wife, who was mournfully raising her arms. As Acquistapace's wife was pressing the priest's two hands, Signora Camuzzi appeared on the Square. She passed within a yard of the table at which the men were seated, without raising her eyelids, and joined the other group.

"Ah, these women," sighed the lawyer, painfully affected by the disapproval of pretty Signora Camuzzi. Her husband remarked :

"Baroness Torroni too will at once side with the priest."

The lawyer and his friends looked round with down-cast faces towards the Palazzo Torroni. Instead of the Baroness, there appeared, at the corner of the street leading towards the inn, Italia Molesin, the actress.

"Look at them cackling round him and flapping their wings, the geese !" said Polli, the tobacconist, rendered courageous by his wife's absence. "I wonder they don't lick the grease-spots from his cassock !"

The municipal secretary probed further into the wound.

"You must not imagine, lawyer, that you will find it easy to get the better of Don Taddeo and his party. He avoids you—so much the worse. He is sheltering himself behind the locksmith, Fantapiè, who does all the work for the church and the convent, and will not have finished the key a moment sooner than the priest desires. . . ."

A swarm of schoolchildren came tearing out of the Corso, enveloped Italia, dashed on past her, and made such a hubbub that further conversation was impossible. The pigeons flew up from the pavement into the air, and settled on the cornices of the cathedral. Some flew back again to the fountain and settled on the edge of its basin. Italia drew near ; the shawl had slipped from her shoulders ; she swung her hips and her eyes from side to side, munching as she walked. When she saw the pigeons, she walked towards them and, calling gently, held out her hand, in which were some breadcrumbs. At the same time she raised her head, as though in expectation of applause. Instead, Acquistapace's wife said : " Is it allowed, Reverendo, that a lost woman should feed the cathedral pigeons ? "

As Don Taddeo sighed, Nonoggi's wife added :

" I shall fetch my broom. Just think of it ! The very first night ! And with a nobleman ! "

Signora Camuzzi still kept her eyelids lowered. Suddenly she pressed her lace shawl against her neck and spat ; the action became her ; they watched the silver spittle fall to the ground beyond her black dress. Italia drew herself up with a questioning look. The group before the Café were silent. At length the lawyer hazarded :

" These ladies seem to know something. I wonder if Nonoggi——"

Without looking at him, the chemist replied :

" Even without Nonoggi, things always come out sooner or later."

" It's revolting," exclaimed the lawyer. " I wash my hands in innocence—though I may add that I was the first person to learn what had occurred."

But when Iole Capitani, the doctor's wife, who had arrived meanwhile, asked the priest in her indolent voice whether the actress would not be locked up so that she

might not seduce any one else, the lawyer was roused to indignation.

"Well, really ! She of all people ! When a woman is as fat as she is, she should not speak ill of others !"

Italia came up to them with tears in her eyes and asked :

"What's the matter with those ladies ?"

The silence of the others intensified the lawyer's embarrassment.

"Nothing," he declared. "We are in a little town, that's all ; the people here are upset if a woman oversleeps herself."

"But the young lady had earned her sleep," said Polli good-naturedly.

"I should think so indeed ! That journey in the diligence, and at Sogliacco we played every night . . ."

"And perhaps love too ?" suggested the lieutenant, stroking his uniform.

"Passion !" exclaimed the lawyer in an envious tone. "For artists love with passion, and that is exhausting, as I know."

"How true !"—Italia thanked him ; and her eyes rested on him caressingly. The lawyer panted.

"This young lady," said Gaddi, the baritone, "is not easily exhausted ; she eats too much macaroni."

"One should not jest about women," remarked old Giordano suavely, "they are too serious a matter."

"Thank you, Cavaliere"—and her eyes caressed him too. "I like a man to be gallant."

"We know it, we know it !"—with a thump between the glasses, and the tobacconist, his face as red as a lobster, looked round at the chemist. "The baron !" they whispered in smothered tones, and they both burst out laughing.

"What's the matter with those gentlemen ?" asked Italia. In order to enlist their sympathy she caressed

them both with her eyes, and, to be on the safe side, the lieutenant as well.

The lawyer wagged his finger at her ; she laughed ; and meantime Signora Camuzzi walked past them from the cathedral with lowered eyelids. Italia looked after her with obsequious curiosity.

" Was that the lady who spat ? " she whispered. " And why did she spit in front of me ? "

" I too have been insulted," said old Giordano, his face again very wrinkled, and he relapsed into gloomy meditation.

Nello Gennar. started as though roused from slumber and stared vacantly.

" There is some one here who knows everything. Everything, do you understand ? Isn't it terrible ? "

" I had forgotten," said old Giordano with a shudder. " My memory ! But now I know the source of all luck in this town. That house in the corner behind the tower——"

Italia's eyes involuntarily followed his, as he pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. The lawyer murmured " Hush ! " and Polli whispered :

" Don't look that way."

" It's terrible to feel that unseen eyes are always upon one," repeated Nello Gennari, looking down at the ground. The baritone took his watch-chain in his hand.

" I can't say that it's particularly pleasant."

" What's the matter ? Oh, what is the matter with you ? "—Italia pressed the backs of her hands to her mouth.

" Have you got any horn charms, Gaddi ? " asked the old tenor. " One ought always to wear them."

Quickly and without turning round, he stretched out two fingers towards Mancafede's house.

" For God's sake, what's the matter ? " entreated Italia. " I shall go away."

"Come, come," said the lawyer. "We all live here, and it doesn't hurt us. It's a case of a girl who for nine years, though she is not ill, has not left her house, and yet knows everything that has happened, and occasionally also things that have not yet happened. . . ."

"One must admit"—and the municipal secretary smiled mockingly, "that it may appear a little uncanny to any one who is not accustomed to it."

"I shall go away."

Italia pushed back her chair. The lawyer caught hold of her and pushed her down into it.

"You, an artist, want to flee before a simple manifestation of human nature?"

"As for simple—" began the secretary. Italia, in the grasp of the lawyer, looked round for help.

"That's why I have been insulted," continued old Giordano, "I, who for fifty years—"

"Was that why that lady spat in front of me?" asked Italia, with a look of understanding.

"But science—" the lawyer began.

"Is any one safe!" cried Nello Gennari; he leapt up, and crossing his arms stalked wrathfully round the table. "She knows," he thought suddenly, "where I spent the night and that I love Alba! I would rather be dead than know that a human being shared my secret. But she shares it—even yesterday she knew the name!—and she may betray me. I am dependent on her favour. How is that to be endured!" He sat down again and clasped his head in his hands.

"Science will—" said the lawyer. Old Giordano suddenly raised his arms and drew in a long breath through his open mouth.

"And my prophecy! This town has less than a hundred thousand inhabitants, and I am surrounded by mystery. I shall die here."

"Yes, one ought to be careful"—and the baritone

toyed imperturbably with his horn charms. The old man shuddered. The lawyer was suddenly seized with a sort of paroxysm. His shoulders shook violently, his hands clutched the air convulsively, his veins swelled, and his eyes were the eyes of a man who is being strangled.

Suddenly, Dorelengi, the conductor appeared at the table and said breathlessly :

" If you gentlemen will be so kind—a rehearsal ! "

No one responded. Italia was pulling her handkerchief between her teeth ; old Giordano was gazing indignantly into space. Then the lawyer broke the silence.

" Good day, Dorelengi, take a seat ! "

" Let us waste no time, gentlemen ! That wretched school has already detained me long enough. For I am a paltry village musician, and I must needs teach the children singing. Pray come ! "

As no one moved, he turned pale and faltered :

" But what has happened ? I don't understand——"

The lawyer made despairing gestures ; then suddenly dropped his arms and remarked casually :

" They prefer not, Dorelengi. These gentlemen propose to leave us."

" Oh yes, to leave ! "—Italia nodded, trembling and writhing as though entwined with serpents.

" I too shall leave," said old Giordano. " I don't want to die here."

The conductor clutched wildly at a chair and missed it.

The lawyer seized his arm and forced him to sit down.

" Courage, Dorelengi ! I too am grieved at this episode ; but what is one to do ? Artists are subject to whims, as we were already aware. Whoever wants genius must be prepared for whims too."

" In any case," declared the baritone, after he had

carefully examined the charms on his watch-chain, "it will be better for us to leave."

Nello Gennari unclasped his hands from his forehead ; his glance was wild and troubled ; closing his eyelids, he bent back his head and shook it slowly and emphatically.

"You are joking," exclaimed the conductor with a forced smile. "A capital joke. But shall we be getting on ? It is growing late, and the theatre is some distance from here."

"They are in earnest, my poor Dorlenghi"—the lawyer clapped him on the back. "Our artists are afraid of the invisible one behind there. No, don't look that way ! And after all, who knows ! There are reasons for everything ; and even I, maestro, am beginning to wonder. For, let us speak the truth ! Remarkable things have been occurring in rather rapid succession. Why should Don Taddeo have made the unpleasantness about the key on this particular day ? And then, I had forgot : the wife of Malandrini, the innkeeper—yes, Ersilia Malandrini, saw the ghost of her father last night."

Italia began to laugh hysterically. They all gazed at her in horror.

"A ghost ? " she asked.

"Certainly, a ghost, Signorina," affirmed the lawyer gravely. "For I am not one of those who deny the existence of the soul. I am not an enemy of religion but only of the priests."

"But what a ghost, oh what a ghost——" and Italia shook with laughter.

"I do not like a woman without religion," remarked Acquistapace, the chemist, in his honest voice. She stopped immediately and looked into his eyes with frank dismay.

"The Signorina is laughing ! Do you see that she is laughing ? " repeated the conductor. He had risen

from his seat, and they saw his delicate skin flush beneath the fair beard. Then he said in a voice that trembled violently :

" I knew it. You would not leave me in the lurch. Where is Signorina Flora Garlinda ? "

" Oh," said Gaddi, " you can count on her, maestro ; she will sing—even if it be alone, without us ; and no ill-luck or evil eye or ghost will restrain her, for she believes in nothing."

" Well, let us go on ! The piano is up there "—and he pointed to the steep alley ; " I had a great trouble to get it up. . . . Well ? Gentlemen, I beg you, I beg you ! "

" Perhaps it would be better to believe in nothing ? " suggested the lawyer.

" If you don't come, what shall I do ? " said the conductor, and he clutched his forehead.

" It is difficult not to believe in certain things," remarked Cavaliere Giordano. " Particularly in the theatrical profession."

" My future ! You do not mean that it has all been in vain ? "

" I know that from experience "—and the baritone struck himself on his broad chest. " At Pesaro the rouge-pots disappeared, though we had had them in our hands only a moment before, and were discovered in another dressing-room. I had to fetch back my own several times from the *prima donna*."

" Your wife shall hear about that," said Italia.

" Am I never to have a chance here ? "—and the conductor thumped his chair violently, and with bowed head gazed at the swollen veins on his hands, which were moist with perspiration and protruded from sleeves that were shabby and over-long.

The others looked at him indignantly.

" You were glad enough to come. It seems to us that a hundred and fifty——"

Cavaliere Giordano, with a wave of his hand, reduced the citizens to silence.

"At Parma the theatre—many of those who have performed there do not know this, but it is a fact—the theatre, I say, has a ghost. I have seen it."

He nodded impressively to each in turn.

"It is the ghost of a court lady, who lived a hundred years ago and is said to have loved a tenor although forbidden by a religious vow. Now, whenever a young and unknown tenor is singing, her ghost walks through the passage from the castle to the theatre. She sits in the box which she occupied during her lifetime, and waits to see whether the stranger will hold that note . . ."

"That note?" they repeated.

The conductor had already leapt up again. He took a few steps, angrily pushed aside a noisy group of youngsters and went up to the fountain.

"And my overture!" he kept repeating, at first in a tone of stupefaction, then wrathfully, then with clenched teeth. He leant his hands on the edge of the fountain and groaned aloud.

"It was to be performed in the theatre! Garlinda was to sing my aria, 'Unhappy fate!' Why is she here? Why are they all here? Oh, they refuse to help me to win the fame that I deserve? They want to keep me back?"

He clutched at his hair and clenched his fist.

"Let them beware! I have their contracts; and with the aid of those contracts I shall ruin them, ruin them without mercy!"

And he spat into the fountain. Then he turned back, with the toes of his crooked legs bent slightly inwards; and conscious that, as he drew nearer, his face automatically assumed a bashful expression, he strove to look ferocious.

"In view of the impossibility of obtaining accurate

information on this subject," said Cavaliere Giordano, "you will understand, gentlemen, how difficult my position was."

"The devil!"

"Only imagine! You arrive at Parma quite unsuspecting; you sing away lightheartedly, and then in the last interval, by the merest chance, you learn from some well-meaning soul that in the third box on the right a ghostly lady is seated, waiting to see whether you will hold the note upon which her lover died a hundred years ago. If you hold it, you will die too: that is a certainty. You will suffocate as you sing it."

"How pleasant!"

"And you do not know which one it is! The reports do not agree. It might be the high 'd,' gentlemen, the high 'd' of my great aria, 'Oh! pale star!' from *Galatea*. But am I to renounce my high 'd,' with which I invariably bring down the house. Yet now perhaps I am to die for it, to perish miserably of suffocation? It is a choice between life and glory. . . . Gentlemen, I was young, I chose glory."

"Bravo! Bravo!"

The lawyer laughed huskily, unconscious of offence, merely from excitement, because beneath the table his foot had encountered another which, if he was not mistaken, was that of Italia Molesin. Cavaliere Giordano looked at him severely, and the lawyer, feeling himself detected, raised his eyebrows.

"To be sure, I also argued to myself: possibly it was not upon the 'd' that that charlatan succumbed, for no one can hold that for two minutes save myself. No matter, as I stand in front of the prompter's box, the whole audience holds its breath, and I sing out my high 'd' and hold it on and on and on:—Oh, I can assure you, I was not feeling very happy. Possibly I was

sweating a little, possibly everything was swimming before my eyes ; possibly even my strength began to fail. But heaven directed my glance, and in the third box on the right I saw a figure rise up and clap soundlessly. The blood rushed to my heart ; with an effort I broke off, and all over the house I heard the clapping of innumerable hands, and I knew that I was saved. I bowed to the third box on the right, and at that moment the figure moved backward and disappeared. To this day I seem to see her before me : she is very pale and dressed like an abbess."

"Like an—— !"

Nello Gennari suddenly rose from his seat and stood very erect, his hand on his heart, his face pale and distraught. At last he recovered his voice.

"Like an abbess ! Yes, it was she. A nun !—and that tenor died for her. Your story is true, Cavaliere ! I believe it !"

He sat down. They were all dumbfounded.

"Cavaliere, I must beg you," began the conductor, in a faint, breathless voice. The lawyer thrust back his chair, turned round, and, with outstretched hands, walked away across the Square.

"What's the matter with him ?" asked Italia in a tone of disappointment. For under the table her knee too had meanwhile encountered that of the lawyer. "Who is that with him ?"

"It's Mancafede, the merchant, the father of the woman behind the tower—don't look that way ; she can see us."

"It doesn't seem dangerous."

"Gentlemen," began the conductor once more, "you have probably not reflected what the consequences would be——"

The two men drew near. The lawyer was talking in the other's ear, panting and gesticulating as he did so.

Suddenly he pushed the merchant in front and let go his arm.

The merchant bowed and stretched out his dry, cool hand, turning his face with its shelving brows and its look of an old hare to each in turn.

"If you gentlemen do not object——"

Mancafedè did not sit down until each in turn had nodded assent. Their eyes rested amiably on his little round figure in the thick brown jacket, which looked as though it were his own fur.

"You have a daughter?" asked the Cavaliere condescendingly.

"My daughter has spoken of you, Cavaliere."

"That was hardly necessary."

"As you please. In any case, as she is very much alone, she likes to occupy her mind, and so it seems that she knows more about the world than the rest of us and about certain things which"—with his hand on his heart—"are too high for the rest of us. Your fame, Cavaliere, has robbed my Evangelina of her sleep. Generally she sleeps after dinner, but yesterday she got up again after a few sighs and said: 'Papa, now he is on his way here!' 'Who, my little one?' 'He, Cavaliere Giordano.' And in fact, when you consider, gentlemen, is she not right, and is it not a real miracle that a man who is being anxiously awaited in Paris and London should flout them all and bestow his favour on us? It seems hardly credible that he should be sitting here in our midst, like one of ourselves?"

"Very true," said the citizens thoughtfully. The lawyer remarked:

"We really ought to put up a tablet in the Town Hall to commemorate the occasion."

The secretary, Camuzzi made a wry face, but he had the majority of the citizens against him. They declared:

"A good idea ! A patriotic action ! The town owes it to itself !"

Cavaliere Giordano, famous and happy, bowed in all directions. Then he turned to the merchant confidentially :

"And it was no doubt by some accident, sir, that your daughter learnt of my impending arrival ? She did not acquire this information spontaneously and in a mysterious fashion ? All that is mere talk ?"

Mancafede listened silently to the Cavaliere's entreaties. If he made an enemy of the old tenor, that bale of red flannel which the peasants had not bought and which he now hoped to dispose of to the actors might remain in his shop still longer. But fatherly pride triumphed, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"What accident, pray, since no one but the maestro knew anything about it ? Tell him yourself, maestro, whether you dropped a hint of it to a living soul !"

"To spare myself mortification, in case the Cavaliere failed to arrive. But what has it availed me"—and the conductor's blue eyes were moist and angry—"as he now intends to go away without having sung ?"

The merchant clasped his hands in horror, and a murmur of distress rose from the circle of citizens. The Cavaliere calmed them with a gesture of airy sublimity.

"Don't alarm yourselves !" he said—he paused and pictured to himself the memorial tablet—"I shall stay."

"Ah !"

"I have reflected that I stayed in Parma too despite the danger of which you know. It may be that this is the town with less than a hundred thousand inhabitants which is to be fatal to me : but, with no less resolution than at Parma, I set glory above life" ; and his hand descended on the table. The conductor seized it and shook it violently.

"Cavaliere, never shall I be able to thank you for what you have done for me !"

He stammered in a tearful voice :

"Then dare I hope that the other gentlemen too——"

"They will remain," finished the merchant. "That we know without asking my daughter."

And he reminded Gaddi, the family man, of the increased remuneration if the theatre was sold out. The baritone laughed heartily. To Signorina Molesin Mancafede promised a rich and influential friend. She and the lawyer blushed and looked away from one another.

"But as regards Signor Nello Gennari," said the merchant, "we are sure that all his dreams will come true."

Gaddi had already stretched out his hand to restrain his friend, but Nello showed no resentment ; he swallowed in his throat and, to the surprise of all, dropped his eyes before the merchant's mocking gaze.

"Do not let us allow these trifles to detain us any longer !" insisted the conductor, shifting from one foot to the other. "Gentlemen, I shall hold you responsible if we——"

"After all, the maestro is right," said Italia, for the lawyer had trodden on her foot rather heavily ; and she stood up. The others too prepared to leave. Only Nello Gennari remained seated.

"I cannot sing yet," he declared stubbornly. "I must first be alone. Pray go on, and expect me in ten minutes. I must be alone."

He clasped his head between his hands and was deaf to further persuasion. The citizens felt too excited to go to their homes. As the conductor flatly refused to let them accompany the artists, they resolved to continue their session at Polli's shop.

The conductor stumbled in his haste over a group of boys who were crouching down and throwing pebbles. He swept them aside and insisted that they must quit the Square. He was beside himself; everything was in his way: the dogs, the gaping artisans lounging by the wall. Then it struck twelve, and they dispersed amid the cheerful clamour of the midday bells.

The lawyer escorted Italia Molesin. The conductor, who was walking between Gaddi and Cavaliere Giordano, turned round on the first step of the steep alley and cried:

"You understand, of course, lawyer, that we can't admit any strangers to the rehearsal."

"Quite so," the lawyer shouted back. "They won't come, I can answer for that. They're at Polli's."

And he stooped to drive away a goat which was blocking his companion's path. But Italia gave a little scream and skipped past it.

"I admire fearlessness in beautiful women," said the lawyer. The fowls flew screeching away as they clambered up the alley between the black houses, from the doorways of which smoke was belching out.

"It's a good thing we're not leaving," said Italia, laughing. "I don't know how I should have paid for the journey, or even for my room."

"What? But didn't the Baron——?"

He put up his hand to his mouth.

"Who?" she asked.

"Oh, no one!"

Italia turned round and gave him a rapid sidelong glance; then shook her shoulders laughingly and ran on. He panted after her, nodding to right and left.

"Do you notice how they are all coming out on their doorsteps? They have all come to me at some time for advice and assistance. Rightly or wrongly, I am looked upon as an influential man. . . . And also as a rich one,

I dare say. For, do you see the Palazzo ? That corner house with the two pillars : it is the biggest and handsomest of them all ; and as my sister, the widow Pastecaldi, received a settlement on her marriage, it belongs to my brother Galileo and myself—half each. I have a flat there with four beautiful rooms——”

The lawyer stood still and gasped for breath.

“—and a collection of pictures : ah ! such pictures . . . as one does not show to every one ; but if you will pay me a visit, Signorina, you shall see them—oh ! don’t be afraid ! You will be entering the house of a man of honour ”—and he spread out his hand between her and himself. Italia laughed, but very respectfully. One did not often meet a man so chivalrous, who, moreover, gave an immediate and detailed account of his circumstances, as though he were making a serious offer !

“ I will pay you a visit after the rehearsal,” she said, “ and have a look at your beautiful pictures. . . . And your beautiful rooms,” she added, and hesitated, considering whether she should make any further concessions. Instead she dropped her eyes modestly and seductively. He smiled gallantly and laid his withered hand on his heart.

“ Oh ! Signorina Italia, we could understand one another.”

She was about to hasten on, but he continued :

“ I was always an admirer of beauty ; and the moment I saw you——”

“ There he is ! And the eggs ? ” cried a voice from the house ; and a stout woman, with a red, laced velvet bodice and short linen sleeves appeared at the window and raised her finger threateningly.

“ Ah ! That lawyer ! Just like him. He would let his family die of hunger ; he’s always with the women.”

“ My dear,” said the lawyer, bending back his head,

"there are certain things of which you are unable to judge."

"Always the same ! Oh, that lawyer !"—and his sister flung out her arms despairingly ; but her childish face, over which hung two grey wisps of hair, wore a smile of admiration.

"What a handsome young man, is he not, Signorina ? Oh ! You good-for-nothing, go along and amuse yourself. Leave your family without any eggs !"

"I brought them with me ; you can fetch them from the Café. But please take note, my dear, that I no longer have time to attend to your affairs ; I am engaged on more important business."

"Any one can see that," shouted back the widow Pastecaldi, as she withdrew from the window. The lawyer remarked :

"One has to be patient. Such is life in a little town."

He once more laid his hand upon his breast, and Italia, who had tittered, immediately resumed her pious expression.

"When I look at you," he continued, "I feel more clearly than ever that great things are slumbering within me. Perhaps I too was destined to be an artist ? Ah ! Have you ever reflected upon fate ?"

But she was pointing with a look of consternation at a solitary figure standing behind the Palazzo Belotti on the broad open space at the top of the alley. It was a little old man clad in dilapidated garments that had obviously once been fashionable and elegant. His withered face with its old, old eyes seemed to be smiling at a crowd that was not there, while he moved his lips, scraped his foot and, with his left hand on his heart, flourished his rimless hat.

"That's nothing," declared the lawyer. "That's only Brabrà, so called after the noise that he makes when he tries to speak. A poor old man, a little mad but not at all

interesting. Look at me ! A man of my gifts ! I should certainly be justified in—— But no—since I have met you ! ”

He offered her his arm at the last step, which was very steep.

“ There on the terrace you see the palace of Her Excellency the Principissa Cipolla. I am in a position to show it to you as though it were my own house—and there to the right is the convent with the church. A Langobard king of the name of—Dingsda founded it for his daughter, who had a lover.”

“ He must have been very stern ! ”—and Italia gazed up respectfully at the grim, black wall.

“ After we had conquered, the town put it up for auction, but the nuns bought it back. There’s no getting rid of them, those holy petticoats. Do not fail to take a look at the landscape ! What a delicious blue ! Might not one fancy it to be the sea from which Venus is rising ? Any one who possessed the revenues from all that your two eyes can embrace from here would have not less than three million a year to run through.”

“ Heavens ! It would be a sin to spend so much ! ”

“ For a woman I would spend it ! ” cried the lawyer fervently, and he crept on in front of her through a half-ruined archway by the side of the princely palace. “ My sister is right perhaps ? I should be capable of anything for the sake of a woman.”

He drew himself up and scraped his soles on the steps.

“ They ought to have cleaned up the entrance to the theatre. For years the people from the neighbouring streets have selected this particular spot. They have in fact no conveniences in their houses. . . . ”

At that moment lime and gravel came showering down the steps ; above the conductor was stamping and beckoning.

“ Where have you got to, Molesin ? If things go on

at this rate, *Povera Tonietta* will never be performed ! You are costing me a year of my life ! ”

“ You are right, Dorlenghi,” said the lawyer, waving his hand reassuringly. “ We are coming ; we shall be with you in a moment.”

“ I have already told you that I cannot have you here. But the prima donna ? I sent some one to fetch her. And Gennari ? He spoke of ten minutes, and that was half an hour ago ! ”

The conductor rushed down, colliding with the lawyer, who sat down violently on a heap of rubbish, and pounced upon a boy behind the gateway.

“ Run to the Café *Progresso* ! A gentleman is sitting there. If he does not come at once, there will be a fine to pay. And run to Chiaralunzi, the tailor ! He is to send me the lady who is lodging with him. If you are down there in two minutes, you shall see what I will give you.”

The boy was already speeding away. Above Belotti's house, he collided with old Brabrà, fell down heavily and dashed on again. The gentleman was seated at the Café, but he only shrugged his shoulders and sent him away. He even sent away Achilles, who wanted to talk to him. . . .

When it struck half-past twelve, Nello Gennari started, stretched his limbs, took a few reluctant steps towards the steep alley and turned away again. These roads which did not lead to her, these men who did not know her or in whose minds her name was linked with vulgar thoughts—they insulted him. Everything that was not Alba insulted him. Filled with contempt he gazed away over the empty Square, with its every-day sunshine and its every-day shadows. Now all the shutters were closed. In the evening they would be opened again. What a life ! And to such a life he was condemned ! The nobler life for which he yearned was

closed to him. Would Alba ever hear of him ? She was terribly high and distant. That night beneath her windows was already long ago, and it seemed hardly possible that it would ever return. . . . But above in the Town Hall something had moved. The Venetian shutters on the second storey had parted and through the opening a pair of eyes were looking down at him ; he saw a white face—and surely that was a nod ? He stepped up—another nod.

A signal ! Signora Camuzzi, the most modest of them all, had given him a signal ! Nello crossed his arms. Yes, that was what he was fit for : to please and to lie ! Why not ? If he defiled himself, was it not a revenge for Alba's too chaste aloofness ? And was he not paying homage to her by trampling in the dust the deceptive modesty and false pride of other women so that only one remained erect ? One more nod and the face vanished. Nello strode through the arcades and set his foot on the step. A rustle—he turned round hastily, and met the eyes of Flora Garlinda. She had come from the street by the side of the Café and crossed the Square with her rapid step. Without relaxing her speed, she had taken in at a glance the house, the opening in the Venetian shutters and the young man on the steps, had smiled contemptuously and was gone. Nello blushed deeply. Then he angrily threw back his shoulders and entered. The heels of the prima donna were already clattering on the steps of the alley.

So swiftly that the boy who was to show her the way could not keep pace with her she hurried up the street in her long, faded raincloak—which hung loosely about her, because from motives of economy she had only an underskirt beneath it—and in her soiled white felt hat, which she wore to protect her hair : she ran up and away, round the corners, across the narrow terraces between the flights of steps—and whenever through a

gap in the houses her glance lighted upon a garden where children were playing or a family was enjoying a meal in an arbour, she raised her head still higher. Arrived at the top, she gazed neither to right nor left ; below the archway leading to the castle was a little knot of people, and from some hidden opening came the shrill voice of Italia Molesin. " Let me pass ! " —and she looked away over the filth beneath the archway.

She flung open a door ; inside, still blinded by the noonday glare, she saw only blackness. Groping along a wall her hand encountered a human form.

" I beg your pardon ! " said a voice.

" Open the door to the stage ! I can see nothing. Who are you ? "

" I am lawyer Belotti. As chairman of the Committee, I am to be present at the rehearsal."

" Here in the dark ? Pray come along ! Don't you know the way ? "

" I know the way ! Why, the palace is my second home ! "

At that moment he stumbled and fell.

" Oh yes, there are some steps here, as I knew very well, only I wasn't thinking of them."

It grew darker and darker, and the piano and the singing sounded further off.

" We are going wrong," declared Flora Garlinda. " We must turn round and I will go in front. As it is a theatre, I shall soon find my way. . . . We had not noticed this passage. . . . And why are you not inside ? "

" How could I be ? Was I allowed to be ? "—and from the lawyer's voice it was evident that he was flourishing his arms in the darkness. " Dorelenghi has lost his wits ; he insists that strangers are not to be

admitted. I a stranger ! The chairman of the Committee a stranger ! He forgets that he himself is a stranger here and that we can send him away."

"No need for that. Where will you get another conductor all in a moment ? But I will help you."

"Ah ! You will—— Signorina Flora Garlinda, I realised at once that you were a great artist. I said so just now to Polli, the tobacconist——"

"What a good thing you didn't go away, lawyer."

"I dared not. You know there is a crowd outside there. Perhaps they would have guessed that I—that this maestro would not——"

"Here we are," said Flora Garlinda.

The stage lay before them. In the semi-darkness it seemed boundless ; the tin lamp on the piano shed a faint illumination upon four human forms dispersed in the shadowy immensity. The conductor was standing in the centre of the circle of light with upraised hand.

"I cannot allow any contradiction, not even from you, Cavaliere. You are who you are, but I am the maestro here."

"That certainly counts for something," remarked Gaddi, the baritone, who was seated astride on a chair. Italia Molesin came to the door.

"What an ill-bred man !" she said. "He has already called me an idiot."

Flora Garlinda stepped into the patch of light. Her eyes were flashing and the corners of her lips were compressed in scornful triumph.

"Maestro"—very gently—"I have a request to make on behalf of my friend, lawyer Belotti. He wants to hear us."

The conductor flew into a passion.

"That man again ? Wait while I throw him out !"

"A man like myself is not to be thrown out"—and the lawyer advanced with dignity.

"Again!" screamed the young musician, trembling, I am master here. Any one who refuses to obey

"Yes?"—and Flora Garlinda looked him in the eyes with a pitiless smile.

"Can go," he finished in a much lower tone. She nodded.

"Doubtless you have another prima donna."

"Only yesterday," he retorted, "I heard from Fusinati."

"Because she is in a condition in which it is not easy to find employment. But you, maestro, since you are not expecting a child, would of course find another engagement immediately, in case the gentlemen on the Committee should decide——"

"Oh please, Signorina Garlinda, there is no question of that"—and the lawyer shifted from one foot to the other. "Are we not all friends?"

"That is the question. I am the prima donna. I must be allowed to sing before whom I please."

"Far be it from me—— We have misunderstood one another——"

Her face still wore the pitiless smile; he was silent, crushed and prepared for something terrible.

"Moreover," she resumed, "I am accustomed to discuss these matters only with the stage manager."

"Quite right," said Cavaliere Giordano, and he flung his score on to the piano. "Is any one here to be allowed to tell me that my voice is too weak? This young man finds fault with my Geronimo, and yet I am singing merely to oblige him, for every one in this country and abroad knows that my part should have been Piero!"

"In brief, what do you want of me?"

The conductor flung out his arms and his eyelids were red.

"They want a stage manager, by Bacchus," said the baritone. "Well, they can have me!"

"Gentlemen," stammered the lawyer, with a gesture of entreaty, "I would not for the world that on my account——"

"Maestro!"

Flora Garlinda dropped her head on to her shoulder.

"You have never been on a stage. Oh! You have no need to admit it; this whole scene is sufficient proof. Do us and yourself a service and be more modest! We appoint Gaddi our stage manager. In any case it was he who procured the scenery."

Italia Molesin and Cavaliere Giordano were already congratulating the baritone.

"And I," wailed the conductor, "I collected the chorus and you too. It was I who first thought of the performance and secured the approval of the citizens, I who did everything in my power and set everything going. That is nothing; that, it appears, is nothing."

He staggered round the piano, with one hand pressed to his forehead.

"Who says so?"—and Flora Garlinda followed him. "But because you are a man of worth, you should give way on a minor point."

"But I must have an additional fee of fifty lire," the baritone was heard to say.

"He must have fifty lire," repeated Flora Garlinda, drooping the corners of her mouth. And, with a sudden glance of acquiescence:

"After all, whose interests are at stake, maestro? . . . You have written an opera, I believe? What if I were to sing the part of your heroine?"

Then, as he drew in his breath and was silent:

"With or without me; perhaps next year will see me in Milan. We"—she made a low curtsy—"are only stepping stones for you."

"Oh!" he cried, swelling with pride and generosity, "not you, Flora Garlinda—not you. You will be greater than I."

"You think so?" she asked, dropping her eyelids, and she moved away.

"But as long as I am conductor," he cried to the others, "I may perhaps insist that we go on rehearsing until I declare myself satisfied?"

They hastened to agree. The lawyer protested.

"Never, maestro, have I questioned your great talent."

"And so, Cavaliere," cried the conductor, "once more from the beginning, please: 'Be fruitful, my children' . . ."

The old tenor angrily drew himself up and began to sing in hollow, quavering tones.

"Be fruitful, my children! The field my fathers tilled, my grandsons too shall till."

"Listen to him!"—and the conductor mopped his brow and flung himself about on his seat. "And this is only a piano. What will it be like with a whole orchestra?"

The old man's face was distorted with fury, and he seemed on the point of tears. His jaws worked, but no words came.

"I could hear every note," said Italia Molesin sympathetically, and she looked at Flora Garlinda, who was mute and observant. The baritone backed her assertion:

"I, as stage manager, consider the Cavaliere quite up to his old form."

"When an artist is so famous, we ought not——" remarked the lawyer gravely. The conductor suddenly clasped his head in both hands.

"If the lawyer cannot be induced to hold his tongue, I answer for nothing! for nothing!"

The lawyer retreated. The conductor once more laid his hands on the keyboard.

"Signorina Flora Garlinda !"

"Here I am."

"See, my beloved, see our flower-decked house. . . . But Piero !—Oh, heavens ! I had forgotten about that fellow ; he's still not here. How can any one be so devoid of all conscience ?"

"Yes indeed," said Gaddi. "Nello will have to pay for vermoutheads all round. That will give him something to think about."

"Vermoutheads !"—the conductor gasped.

"But we can compel him ! Where is he ? Does no one know where he is hiding ? Signorina Flora Garlinda, you were the last to arrive !"

"What have such things to do with me ?"—and she turned away.

"Is he with some woman ?" whispered Gaddi. She made no reply. The conductor angrily began to play the prelude, and shouted above the noise of the piano :

"We must not let anything delay us ! Signorina Flora Garlinda !"

She sang :

"See, beloved, see our flower-decked house, bidding us blossom. . . ."

After she had sung a few notes, the conductor's hands began to touch the keys very gently and cautiously and he listened eagerly. In spite of his efforts to remain stern, his face became suffused with an expression of childlike rapture, which suddenly gave place to anguish. The singer had stopped.

"It's no good," she said, "I can't sing without a partner."

"I will take his part, the wretch. I will sing with you ! Anything you like !"

"Oh no, maestro ! I must be able to act. It's no use-

if I don't feel him at my side. At home I use the landlord's boy. Let me have the lawyer ! ”

“ Lawyer ! ”—and the conductor stretched out his hand. “ We entreat you. I hope you don't bear any grudge against me ? ”

“ What an idea, maestro ! ”

The lawyer shook his hand. Then Gaddi set him in position, laid his arm under the outstretched arm of the prima donna, with his finger-tips on her shoulder, and adjusted his head.

“ Old Geronimo over here ! Italia walks round fanning herself. Lawyer, you are gazing into the evening sky ! ”

The lawyer opened his eyes very wide. He could not keep still and shuffled his feet.

“ Are we ready ? ” asked the conductor sharply—and he nodded to the singer. . . . When the melody passed from her to the piano and she was silent, the lawyer felt it incumbent on him to entertain his partner.

“ Ah ! now we have come to the famous air, and I am the first person in the town to hear it. For years we have only had it on Polli's gramophone.”

“ Be quiet ! ” shrieked the conductor, white in the face.

“ But that is broken,” said the lawyer ; then he started.

Flora Garlinda was singing again. She now had her hands folded under her chin and her face was bent upwards.

“ Forgive me, Heaven, such great happiness ! ”

“ Kneel down ! ” the stage manager commanded the lawyer in a loud whisper, but the latter was wholly absorbed in keeping his finger-tips on the shoulder of the prima donna and his eyes fixed on the sunset.

“ Kneel down, I say ! ”—and Gaddi pressed him on to the floor, so that it creaked.

" Oh, oh ! " exclaimed the lawyer. The singer was just ending her last appeal to heaven and she sank with her brow on his.

" And I would die for thee ! "

" You are too kind," murmured the lawyer, completely overcome.

Gaddi turned round and pressed his hands to his sides. Cavaliere Giordano collapsed on to a chair. A shriek of laughter came from behind Italia's fan. The conductor stood with his arms hanging at his sides and the sound that he finally emitted was a groan. Then he stammered out :

" What is all this ? Are we buffoons ? I cannot find words. And at this moment, at this moment ! "

He came forward and bowed before the prima donna.

" Signorina Flora Garlinda, I ask your pardon on behalf of these gentlemen."

" And pray why ? " she said very coldly. He blushed and put his hand to his forehead.

" What I wanted to say was this : We have finished for to-day. In the afternoon I shall have the chorus and in the evening the orchestra. Good-bye, until to-morrow ! "

And he had gone. They looked at one another.

" Very well, let's go and have something to eat ! " said the baritone. " Won't you get up, lawyer ? "

As Gaddi and Cavaliere Giordano were taking leave of Flora Garlinda in the Square, they noticed that Italia and the lawyer had vanished.

" Already," said the baritone ; and the old tenor :

" Italia is right. Our profession demands it. In our profession it is well to be young."

" Is not that remark born of an empty stomach, Cavaliere ? " asked Flora Garlinda.

The two men called after one another :

" At five o'clock at the Café ! "

And at five o'clock they were seated there—as yet the only figures on the Square. Handsome Alfo served them, smiling fatuously. Inside, Achilles leant his arms on the counter and snored. For a long time they did nothing but watch hopefully the lengthening shadows of the canvas awning above them. A cool, malodorous air was wafted from Lucia's alley. Cavaliere Giordano drew from his cuff a little paper fan.

In the street by the Town Hall Nello Gennari came into sight. He was walking very slowly, with bowed head ; as usual, his shoulders were slightly raised and his arms hung stiffly by his sides.

"You look like a dejected Pierrot," Gaddi shouted to him. The young man slowly raised his eyes and gazed at them with a look of helpless melancholy. The other man stood up quickly, seized his arm, and drew him round the corner of the house.

"Nello, tell me, what has happened to you since yesterday ? "

"Nothing," Nello replied.

"But you look as though you had lost your mother, and you have been as irritable the whole day as a gambler who's had ill luck. Why didn't you come to the rehearsal ? "

Nello suddenly began to move his shoulders up and down ; his glance wavered and his breath came in gasps. He clutched at the other man's hand.

"Virginio, you are my friend ! Don't ask me ! "

He pressed the baritone's hand with a look of fervent entreaty.

"I am a lost man ! You don't know. It revolts me when I feel the warmth of my own hand in yours."

"You are ill."

"No, I am well—and that is worse for a man like myself. I have trifled away my happiness ; now I must just go on living."

He bent his head, and his companion saw the tears streaming down his face. He stroked his hair.

They drew themselves up and assumed an air of indifference, for footsteps were approaching. Mancafede, the merchant, crossed the Square and looked at them. Now was the moment to advance boldly and look straight into his smirking face. Already he knew everything ! His terrible daughter knew everything ! Now the news was going all round the town, through the Gate and to Villascura. Nello put out his hand, half turning away, as though expecting it to be hacked off, and glancing up nervously from his downcast eyes. But the merchant scraped his foot politely, as though protesting his harmlessness. He had been going through his stock, he said, and his daughter had been making tomato preserve, so that they really knew nothing of what was going on. And Nello dropped his head and blushed, feeling that he had been granted a reprieve.

Then Acquistapace, the chemist came over from his shop and raised his thumb as though he knew something. Nello was once more stricken with terror. But when the chemist had ordered his coffee and rum, carefully adjusted his wooden leg under the table and in turn clapped each of the company on the knee with a knowing air, he exclaimed : " And the lawyer ? "

As the three singers only shrugged their shoulders, he rubbed his hands excitedly.

" You won't believe it ! That lawyer ! But I have proofs. He sent for cherries in brandy from my shop. He is celebrating orgies, is the lawyer—orgies, gentlemen, with a woman ; and you know her."

" We ? " asked Gaddi.

" I know," declared Mancafede ; " my daughter told me."

Nello became rigid.

" Well, let's hear what she said ! "

But the merchant only smiled complacently, and Nello collapsed.

"We have no idea," said Cavaliere Giordano.

"Just guess!"—and the chemist put his finger up to his nose. "You have a fair colleague, Signorina Italia . . ."

"Italia!" exclaimed the baritone. "Oh, that's impossible. She is most respectable."

"And yet, and yet——"

The dog-like eyes of the old warrior shone; he laid his finger on his breast.

"I have first-hand information."

For the lawyer's sister, Signora Artemisia had come herself for the cherries, and she had told him everything. Through a crack in the door she had seen into her brother's room. By the sofa a woman's hat was hanging, and seated on the sofa was the woman herself.

"Oh! gentlemen! Oh! The lawyer!"

The tobacconist and the municipal secretary joined them.

"I can't believe it," declared Gaddi, with a wink at Cavaliere Giordano; "such a respectable girl as our Italia."

"Your Italia!" screeched Polli, and he slapped his thighs.

"Oh! let's have a little talk about her. The butcher, Cimabue, knows a lot about her."

"Why, has he butchered her?"

"He has sent her enough fillet to give her indigestion for three days—and who fetched it? None else than lawyer Belotti's sister."

The secretary spread out his hands.

"I don't believe it. The lawyer is a braggart. Never has he succeeded in seducing a woman. It is all pure invention."

Polli and the chemist raised their arms.

"Why, Andreina of Pozzo has a child by him!"

"A child by the lawyer! That the world will never see," and Camuzzi banished all hope with a wave of his finger. "Oh, imagine it!—a child by the lawyer."

"Already?" asked Lieutenant Cantinelli, bowing to the company. "All that I know up to now is that Serafini, the pastry-cook, has sent his boy up to them with ices. The lawyer himself took in the dish, and the boy noticed that he had nothing on under his dressing-gown. The actress ran past in the background, and she had still less on."

"Ah! That lawyer!"

"Orgies, as I told you!"—and the chemist struck the table between the glasses. Mancafede, the merchant, fidgeted on his chair. He began to speak:

"I know more than any of you. My daughter told me how often those two—how often the lawyer—you understand me."

The secretary made a gesture of incredulity; but Polli, the lieutenant and the chemist looked at each other and grew redder and redder. All at once they let out the air from their puffed-out cheeks with a sound like an explosion. Polli had leapt up, and was stamping up and down and slapping his thighs. The lieutenant thumped his sword on the pavement and groaned. The chemist gave vent to a series of bellows, which attracted a crowd round the table. Suddenly a shrill voice cried:

"There they are!"

And the swarm of urchins, headed by the white-aproned pastry-cook's boy, plunged forward towards the steep alley. The people who were chattering round the fountain followed them. Nonoggi, the barber and Serafini, the pastry-cook had already appeared in their doorways. The crowd formed into two ranks, and then they saw lawyer Belotti, accompanied by the actress,

appear on the steps. Before taking leave of his companion, he puffed out his chest and smiled triumphantly above the heads of the crowd assembled to pay him homage, and towards the Café, where all were silent ; then he crooked his arm gallantly and offered it to his lady, that he might escort her between the two files of spectators. Young Savezzo had appeared on the scene, and he began to clap.

The gentlemen, with the exception of Camuzzi, who shook his head and smiled, rose to receive the pair and stretched out their hands. Italia, with one cheek freshly powdered, gave her hand, turning her shoulders slightly. She beamed up at the lawyer, whose face was radiant ; he murmured words of encouragement as he shook each hand in turn.

" Ah ! my honest friend, Acquistapace—and Polli, always merry ! "

He ordered a specially strong coffee for his lady, and she had to admit that she was tired.

" There is so much to be seen at the lawyer's," she declared.

" What pictures he has ! You would not believe——"

" Hush ! " he murmured.

" And all the food ! It can't be denied that the cooking at the lawyer's house is very good. He had only meat of the best quality."

" He was always a good judge of that ! " cried Polli.

" He always knew how to get hold of plump and tender flesh."

The lawyer considered that the flattering side of his achievement had not been sufficiently emphasised.

" And the Baron," he whispered to the tobacconist. The chemist overheard the remark and whispered back :

" You have cuckolded him, lawyer. Ah ! If ever any one has cuckolded him, you are the man."

"You are great, lawyer!" said Polli, with respectful admiration.

The cutting voice of the municipal secretary disturbed the lawyer in the enjoyment of this adulation.

"Look there!"—and Camuzzi pointed to the cathedral.

A crowd of youngsters were jostling each other on the steps and eagerly drinking in the words of the pastry-cook's apprentice. Now and then his hands rose above the circle of listeners, and there was a burst of laughter.

"It needs no sorcery to divine what is amusing them."

"What do you mean, Camuzzi?" asked the lawyer, somewhat taken aback. "I have no idea."

He looked at Italia, who had blushed a deep crimson, and laid his hand on his breast.

"I assure you, upon my honour, that the boy saw nothing."

The secretary nodded spitefully.

"His conscience is beginning to prick now that he sees his work, the old libertine. For he is corrupting our children. Our youth, gentlemen, are in danger!"

"That is gross exaggeration," declared the lawyer, and, seeing approval in the faces around him, he drew himself up more boldly.

"Those scamps are worse than we are. Coletto there, the pastry-cook's boy, was caught with the little girl who washes the plates at Mialandrini's. I appeal to the lieutenant as witness. . . . And anyway, gentlemen, look over there, look at the priest!"

Don Taddeo had raised the leather curtain from the cathedral door, and was listening to the boys with the air of one ready to spring. Suddenly he had pounced upon them and was scattering them beneath a hail of blows. The first to recover their self-possession had already made off, and the white cap of the pastry-cook's boy had disappeared into the Corso, but Don Taddeo was still

laying about him, pouncing upon the weakest and least agile while they ducked and screamed. The citizens were indignant. Achilles thrust out his paunch and muttered :

"Look at him, just look at him ! The ugly brute !"

"If one could pay him back in his own coin——" suggested Polli, and even Mancafede, the merchant, admitted that the priest was going rather far.

"Such are the allies of Signor Camuzzi," declared the lawyer. "Such are the people for whose interests he is concerned."

"The moral laws," protested the secretary; "are not less valid because——"

"Oh, pray !"—and the lawyer pushed away his cup. "Don't drag in the moral laws ! The unshackled humanity which we others respect——"

He looked at Italia.

"—is more moral and certainly more pleasing to God than your gloomy negations !"

"Bravo, lawyer !" said Cavaliere Giordano.

"Well said," confirmed Gaddi. Young Savczzo squinted down his nose and added :

"Rationalism, progress and fruitfulness—to whom shall we look for these if not to the lawyer !"

And the lawyer accepted the congratulations of the citizens with a solemn air. Italia's face too wore a dignified expression, and her glance roamed round the table in search of approval. As the last of the boys limped past, howling and holding his hand to his sore spot, the lawyer called him to the table and began to console him indignantlly, while Italia thrust lumps of sugar into his mouth. The municipal secretary fingered his elegant necktie and then wiped his glasses and looked through them with his fishy eyes. In order not to seem completely vanquished he turned to the actors :

"Not that I am a hypocrite or an enemy of progress ; but I do not like boasting. For, despite appearances, I

do not believe that the lawyer has conquered a woman, because I do not believe in any of his successes. I do not believe that in our town anything is happening or can happen."

Young Savezzo murmured, squinting furiously :

"A great many things might happen, but one ought not to set all one's hopes on the lawyer or to imagine that genius is confined to certain families to the exclusion of all the rest."

Conscious of the secretary's mocking glance, he began to lose his temper :

"The people here fawn before incapacity ; I too have to fawn before it ; and talents which would be invaluable to our public life are frittered away in petty offices in obscure back rooms."

"In your father's, for example ? " asked the secretary.

"Why not in my father's ? Does any one know of the political plans that I am revolving in my mind ? Very different plans, by Heaven, from the construction of laundries and parish roads. All that I need is wider connections, ampler scope and free competition. But since they are lacking, I must cringe before mediocrity."

His brows were knit in a heavy frown, and the muscles rose and fell on his crossed arms. The municipal secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"In time perhaps you will get over seeing greatness in any one—or at any rate in yourself."

Behind the poultry-woman's alley Nello Gennari caught sight of the small, solitary figure of the prima donna. He dashed into the street.

"It's cool here," he said, drawing a deep breath ; and bending over her :

"You were a very good girl not to betray me."

"What had I to gain by it ? I leave you to your filthiness."

He bit his lip.

"You are hard, Flora. But you have a right to be ; appearances are against me."

Then, as she gave a little sniff :

"I envy you ! If I could only live, as you do, solely for art ! If I could have one single purpose, one single ambition !"

She surveyed him with her cold, quick eyes.

"That is not for you, my child. Remain as you are !"

"But I too——" and he gave vent to a stifled sob, "now have one single, great purpose——"

Under his breath, his heart expanding as he spoke the words :

"—for which I mean to live—for which I mean to die."

She looked uneasy.

"Do you want to learn to sing ? Tell me whether you want to learn to sing !"

"I shall never be able to do much more than nature taught me to do."

"And that is right for you," she said with an air of relief.

At the Café they all stood up to make room for her. The lawyer laid his right hand on his heart and began to sing.

"See, beloved, see our——"

He turned up his eyes to atone for the lack of melody.

"Ah ! Signorina Flora Garlinda ; any one who has heard you sing that will not easily forget it."

"Since you are to sing it, Signorina," said Polli gallantly, "I need not have my gramophone repaired ; that will be a saving anyhow."

"Couldn't you teach it to my wife ?" asked Camuzzi, and the lieutenant was about to make the same request

on behalf of his, when the chemist put up his hand to his ear. They heard a clatter and the cracking of a whip ; the boys ran down the street by the Town Hall ; and finally Masetti appeared aloft on his box-seat.

"There won't be any one inside," said the merchant.

"I have noticed," said Polli, "that if a day has been particularly good the next one brings nothing."

"As we already have the Signorina among us," and the lawyer bowed to the prima donna. Italia nudged him in the ribs, and he trod on her foot to make up for his negligence.

Two nuns alighted from the diligence and disappeared immediately up the steep alley. The chemist swore.

"It's a mystery to me," remarked the lawyer, "where those young women are always gadding off to. What can they——"

He stopped ; Baron Torroni in his leather gaiters leapt down from the diligence.

"Oh," said the lieutenant, "as regards these gad-about nuns, we know of some very strange cases. . . ."

The secretary laughed carelessly.

"Ah ! the lawyer sees his rival and trembles."

"The fact is," said Polli, "that, in respect to certain rights of the Baron the lawyer is not quite——"

And he cast a meaning glance towards Italia. She exclaimed indignantly :

"Why what's the matter with you all ? I really believe you imagine—— Oh ! how wicked you are ! I feel very much like telling you what really happened !"

She sobbed. The lawyer rose.

"This young lady is under my protection, and Signor Camuzzi hopes in vain that I shall tremble. Pray, did I tremble before Don Taddeo ? And surely no one will deny that the Church is a more dangerous enemy than the aristocracy."

"I may mention, however," said the chemist, "that

early this morning a peasant from Borgo came to my shop. The Baron had beaten a hole in his skull, for indeed he is as fond of flogging as a peasant."

"But the Baron is being awaited by the Baroness!" cried Polli, "and as you are with Signorina Italia, what more do you want of him?"

The lawyer too saw the Baroness standing by the lions, and he stepped out still more boldly. Italia caught him up and laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't do anything foolish, lawyer!"

And a little further on :

"So you still believe that I and the Baron——? In spite of everything that I have said to you and done for you? Oh, how unhappy I am!"

In these critical circumstances the lawyer felt that the time for gallant euphemisms had passed.

"Of course! Since I saw it with my own eyes!" he said.

But his strongest proof was that Italia had yielded to him. He was convinced that he would not have won her, had she not made a beginning with the Baron.

"You lie!"—and she turned pale, with a kind of furious exaltation, because she, who might be taxed with so much, was at length taxed unjustly. "What did you see?"

"What the deuce! He came out of the inn in the early morning, and the landlord knew why."

"No; he did not know why, but I will tell you why. The Baron came from the landlord's wife! For the ghost of her father which appeared to her was Baron Torroni; it was too good-natured of me not to tell them all."

The lawyer murmured :

"Speak a little lower! We are not alone in the Square"—and, after some reflection :

"Oh, women! And you expect me to believe this?"

He raised his shoulders, spread out his palms and looked round, as though appealing for confirmation of the improbability of her assertion. To be sure, if she was speaking the truth, there was no more question of a dispute with the Baron ! But where was the glory of having deceived him ? On the other hand it was flattering to be the first—and, rendered bold, he immediately resolved to forsake her.

“ I love only you,” said Italia in a wheedling tone.

“ Oh ! ” said he, turning round.

“ Don’t you love me any more ? ” she asked. He replied condescendingly :

“ You are a good girl.”

When they were seated at the table again, the chemist whispered to the lawyer :

“ You lucky fellow ! She loves you more than the Baron. Any one could see how anxious she was about you.”

“ You think so ”—and the lawyer stroked his moustache.

“ As regards these gadabout nuns,” the lieutenant began once more, “ one hears of very strange cases. . . .” Nello Gennari looked round suddenly. What ? The diligence had arrived ? “ It brought me here yesterday. Is it possible that it was only yesterday ? And then I stood over yonder and saw Alba enter the cathedral. . . . Can it really have happened ? Surely I have been dreaming ? Oh, never will it happen again. I shall never see her again ! ” And he blushed as he remembered his boasts to Flora Garlinda. “ I am utterly trivial. I am driven along by the wind like a little heap of dust that her footsteps have raised.” Yet a hundred times his heart had swelled in the certainty that he would love her and that this love would be his whole future ! And a hundred times he had despaired ! “ I do not understand myself. My soul is in a fever and

my thoughts are at one moment hot as fire and the next as cold as death."

"Where is the maestro?" asked Cavaliere Giordano, whose eyes had been fixed all the while in a glassy stare. "The chorus rehearsal must be over."

"Quite so," said Gaddi, "but these beginners are so enthusiastic. How morbidly excited he was this morning! Surely, if a man does his duty and supports his family, that's all that can be asked of him!"

The old tenor's face wore an expression of lofty scorn. The baritone did not notice it because he saw one of his sons being attacked by some other boys and hastened to the rescue. When the old man found himself alone, a careworn expression once more spread over his face like a cloud and he murmured: "Perhaps after all that's what it comes to."

Flora Garlinda was watching him, though he did not know it. She was leaning against the wall of the house, with one arm on the table and her hand under the old white felt hat, shoving it awry; she was not drinking or smoking, and from time to time she tore off a piece of her roll with her teeth, all the while taking in the whole scene with her eyes, like some mischievous ape.

The lawyer stretched out his hand.

"What you have told us about that priest at Nodi, lieutenant, might equally well apply to our Don Taddeo. More than once when I have seen him going up to the nuns——"

Acquistapace, the chemist, shook his honest head.

"That I don't believe. He is a detestable fanatic, but as regards morals, he is above reproach. We even had a servant girl who was crazy about men, and a pretty creature too——"

Italia interrupted his narrative.

"Lawyer," she said in a trembling voice, "the look that priest gave us when we passed him!"

"Very natural, he was envious! I had forgotten, gentlemen; he came down the street just as we were leaving my house. Perhaps he had been unlucky with the nuns, for I, lawyer Belotti, do not believe in his moral austerity; well, he gave Signorina Italia such a look. . . ."

She covered her face with her hands.

"I shall confess to him. Perhaps that will soften him, and he won't look at me like that again. In any case it is a good thing to confess at the beginning of a season."

The lawyer expressed his horror at her superstition. Camuzzi praised Italia for her religion, always so becoming in a woman, and the others wavered between the two points of view. Flora Garlinda said unexpectedly:

"I too shall confess."

They started.

"Are you pious?"

"Why not," replied Gaddi, "even in the theatrical profession we are decent folk."

"I like to come to an understanding with myself," she declared, her clear eyes glancing at each in turn. "Once I have knelt there in the darkness and unburdened my whole mind, I know a little better who I am and what lies before me."

The lawyer could no longer contain himself.

"And an educated woman like yourself imagines that a priest can forgive sins?"

"If only he be strong enough," she said, gazing above their heads into space. "But generally I have to forgive them myself, for the priest does not understand."

"You are a strange creature," remarked the tobacconist.

"For my sins cannot be caught hold of like a piece of flesh," and she seized Italia's white arm. "They are subtle and complex—and priests are coarse-grained. I

once went into the confession-box of a priest at Sogliacco and said : ‘ Father, I have made a woman unhappy—Zucchini ; she is a big, fat creature, but she took it into her head to be ambitious. As she is the mistress of the manager, Cremonesi, she very nearly went to Parma as prima donna, though she has no talent. I prevented it, Father, by contriving that she should sing the part of Lucia, which is utterly beyond her. By gentle cunning I excited her longing to sing this part. Then I feigned illness ; she was given the part and sang it. What a fiasco ! Her career was ruined for many a long day. And the poor creature came to me in tears on the evening of her humiliation and begged my forgiveness ; she had been justly punished for the wrong she had done me in taking away my part.’ ”

“ What a fine joke ! ” cried the chemist, and they all shook with laughter. Flora Garlinda smiled.

“ There you see ? That was how the priest laughed, because he did not understand. He laughed so that he blew out the curtains of the confession box.”

“ The chorus rehearsal is over ; now the maestro will be coming,” said Cavaliere Giordano.

A gay crowd poured out of the steep alley and dispersed in all directions ; the motley hues of their light blouses, dyed hair and painted faces fluttered across the Square and descended upon the sombre crowd like a swarm of exotic insects borne thither by the breeze.

The lawyer whispered to Nello Gennari.

“ What girls ! You’re a lucky fellow to have so many always at your disposal ! ”

“ But our ladies too,” he added, “ are not to be despised, and not often do we have so many of them gathered on the Square at one time as to-day. Come along, and I will show them to you.”

They went off. The lawyer was radiant ; with one hand he took the arm of the handsome tenor, thrusting the thumb of the other into the armhole of his waistcoat. Admiring glances were turned towards Italia's lover ; and he felt them rest upon his jovial paunch and beaming face.

"That little Paradisi," he whispered, "is setting her cap at you, my friend. Courage, courage ! Ah ! we two can truly say that we are desired."

"I fancy I have seen her before," replied Nello, and, after a little hesitation, "in a town like this I suppose the same people cross the Square every day at the same time ? Shall I see all the people I saw yesterday ?"

"Certainly," replied the lawyer, "and the poultry-woman, Lucia, will be here in a moment. You have not seen her yet, for the diligence was late yesterday, and Lucia is never late. Oh ! She is one of our chief sources of amusement. Though of course, since you artists arrived, everything is changed. There stands the diligence which brought you here yesterday. My friend, let me confide to you an observation of my own : one never knows all that may emerge from a diligence with the passengers who alight from it."

He turned round for approbation.

"There stands Signora Iole Capitani, the wife of our most popular physician. He is nearly a'ways away, often even at night—you understand ? I fancy that woman is going through a crisis. I will introduce you to her, upon condition that you introduce me to that big chorus-girl with the yellow hair, who is talking to young Polli. What does that young blockhead want with her ? Ah ! There is Severino Salvatori with two more actresses in his basket-carriage. He wants the big yellow-haired one to get in too—in vain, my friend, she sticks to her Olindo. What luck that young Polli has ! You must know, sir, that Severino Salvatori is the most—"

elegant of all our young men. He is running through his father's estate. He always has the most beautiful horses. I say that he has enlarged his father's business, for his monocle is bigger than the old man's gold pieces."

The lawyer bowed to the laughing crowd. Nello thought :

"This is the spot from which I saw her yesterday. The crowd was surging forward then as now, and at the first stroke of the Angelus bell it separated. Oh, if it would but separate to-day with equal art ! Will Alba pass before me again to-day at the end of that human alley—with the bells pealing above and the marvellous silence below—alone and swiftly, yonder in the ray of sunlight, which pierced her veil ? I see her now ! Her white profile ! Her coil of hair, red as copper, gleaming in the sunlight ! "

"Lucia, the poultry-woman !" shouted the lawyer, shaking him. "There she is ! "

They saw her standing there, flapping her long arms. The people thronged from all sides ; they made a clucking noise, and the old woman distorted her little red face with its beaked nose in the vain effort to cluck louder than them all. Then a shriek pierced the tumult ; she rushed with outstretched arms to the other side of the fountain after a hen which had fluttered up and fallen into the basin. The boys pushed her face into the water, and she splashed it all about her with her hands. The crowd screamed and fled. . . .

When Lucia had once more disappeared into her alley, the lawyer was still convulsed with laughter.

"She was splendid to-day. You saw her ? I have seen that for the last thirty years, and it never grows stale."

Then, as the maestro came down the steps. "Hallo, maestro !" he shouted.

"That man with him is the principal member of the male chorus. Oh, I know all the theatrical people," declared the lawyer for the benefit of those standing round. "Everything satisfactory, maestro?" he shouted, putting his hand to his mouth.

The conductor did not hear him. He nodded to his companions, and then strode rapidly through the crowd to the *Café Progresso*.

"It went off very well," he said, shaking hands all round, "I am content."

"Won't these chorus-girls let us down?" asked Italia.

"They are better than you, young lady. The common people are the backbone of this country. Give me the people."

He seated himself by the side of Flora Garlinda without looking at her—leant his head against the wall, crossed his arms and, flushed by the inward surging of his satisfied ambition, sunned himself in the public admiration. These people only knew him as a person who taught their children singing, and on patriotic festivals marched through the Corso with a band of artisan musicians. But now he ranked among these famous, exotic artists, had a crowd of people dependent on his orders, hurried hither and thither, the busiest person in the town; and on his shoulders lay the responsibility for the great, fantastic event which they were all awaiting—the opera! He laid his hand on his heart; it was beating too high.

"Now for the orchestra, and the day will not have been wasted," he said with a sigh.

"You are at the happiest time of your life, young man," said Cavaliere Giordano. Gaddi, on the other hand, gave the pre-eminence to a riper age, when one awoke from one's afternoon nap to find the children tugging at one's legs. The citizens sided with the Cavaliere. To be young and to love! Poetry, the

deuce ! On this subject there was a lively interchange of ideas. Meanwhile the conductor jerked himself round towards Flora Garlinda.

"After all no one ever sang 'See beloved, see our flower-decked house' like Livia Damanti," he said, drawing in his breath.

Flora Garlinda smiled.

"You think so ?"

"She sang with so much feeling."

Flora Garlinda curled her lip.

"That is how amateurs talk, maestro. . . . And when did you hear her ?"

"Last winter," he said quickly, "at Parma," and he blushed.

"She has been in America for the last twelve months."

And with her unwavering smile :

"Moreover, 'See beloved' is not one of her parts. She sings contralto."

He dropped his eyes, turned very pale and was silent.

She shrugged her shoulders imperceptibly. Of course he regretted that he had exposed his weakness at this morning's rehearsal when he had praised her so recklessly. Hence this fabrication. He was found out, and his silence was eloquent. She looked away.

"I must have made a mistake," he said, swallowing in his throat. "Moreover, since I have heard you, all that I have heard before counts for nothing. That is the truth."

"True or no," she said, laughing good-naturedly, "we are now beginning to understand each other, aren't we, maestro ? And we know for whom each of us foresees a brilliant future. For what do you think about yourself, maestro ?"

"About myself? About myself?"—with his hand on his heart.

"What can I think ? I am a village bandmaster,

Young Savezzo extended the tips of his fingers towards the musician with studied elegance.

"Maestro, your fame has spread through the town ; it has penetrated even to my study."

"But you yourself are a famous man, lawyer," said the merchant, Mancafede.

Young Savezzo squinted with pleasure down his pock-marked nose. Suddenly he started and looked round for Belotti, the real lawyer. Not finding him, he threw back his head, and with a graceful wave of the hand, declared :

"What would you have, ladies and gentlemen ? One strives, so far as business allows, to assist the spiritual life of the city in which one happens to reside. Is this worthy of thanks ? I do not know. In my own case it is an inward necessity. At times it overmasters me. Then I close the door of my office against the country folk who come to me for counsel, and there at the back of the house, sheltered from the tumult of the world, I look upward for the inspirations which are clamouring for my attention."

He turned up his face, with one hand to his ear. The conductor took advantage of this listening attitude to continue :

"I am a village bandmaster who is writing an opera. How many others are perhaps writing one at the same time as myself !—Yet I feel within me a music for which a whole nation waits, and often, amid the fever of my work, I seem to hear the muffled distant murmur of this waiting nation."

"And you, Signor Savezzo ?" asked Flora Garlinda.

"Exactly the same !" he said, passing his fingers through his hair and congratulating himself that he had laid aside his soft pillow in the night, for now his curls were as crisp as when he left the barber's the previous day. "Exactly the same ! All the time that I was

writing my essay—or rather my prose poem—on Friendship, I saw the members of our Club seated before me and heard their murmurs of applause. In front were the ladies, and just below my desk was the beautiful Alba Nardini—everything just as it subsequently happened, only that Alba sent her maid instead of coming herself. But even the lemonade was as my fancy had pictured it.”

“Ambition !” cried the conductor. “Ambition and the desire to bestow happiness are one, and so too are fame and love. You understand me, Flora Garlinda ! To fare forth into the world, into the great cities, across the sea ; to conduct my work, and, while the crowd applauds, to feel that I am lavishing my wealth upon it. That I am nowhere a stranger, but famous everywhere through the exploits of my soul, and that, when I appear, a thousand grateful sweethearts are already there, awaiting me !”

“A thousand sweethearts !”—Savezzo laughed exultantly. “I will not say no, for I am confident of my powers in that direction. But it is no small thing that, after my lecture on Friendship, a certain lady—whose name honour forbids me to mention—but one of the foremost ladies in our town——”

He squinted down his nose, and rubbed his clumsy fingers to make them white.

“You gentlemen understand one another,” said Flora Garlinda, gazing straight in front of her with her unwavering smile. The conductor leapt from his seat and spread out his hand, but his indignant protest seemed refuted by her smile before he could utter it ; he sank back heavily into his seat. Savezzo turned to him :

“Do you want the bottle, sir ? I am in charge of this vermouth.”

He went on talking. The conductor reflected : “Is

it possible that she puts me on a level with this fellow ? But she is right, for what proof have I that I am other than he ? The plain fact is that we both live in a little town and fancy ourselves better than other people. I am no better. I shall never do anything. My moments of exaltation are born of bad music and leave behind them only nausea, like intoxication after bad wine. I shall never write anything again."

He observed her smile.

"That was what she wanted ! She wanted to humble me and drive me to despair ! She is spiteful and I hate her !—and yet I would prize her belief in me above any one's !"

Full of impotent anguish he said :

"But you yourself, Flora Garlinda ?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I ? Oh ! I am more modest than you gentlemen, less convinced of my genius and of its triumphal flight. I shall work very hard—that is all I know. Perhaps I shall go back to Sogliacco ; perhaps I shall remain in such places for years—it may be five or even seven years before I reach Milan. But then——"

She clenched her little fist so tightly that they could see it tremble.

"When they have once heard me, they will not forget me. I shall no longer depend on luck, and I shall not lose what I have gained. I am young—and my voice, my wealth, my glory—all that I conquer will endure till I am old, until I die."

She stood up.

"I am going for a walk."

"It is still too hot ; you will injure your health," said the citizens.

She laughed and left them.

The conductor was gazing down at the ground.
"The future is hers ; she has no need of dreams."

Cavaliere Giordano turned round suddenly and remarked once more : " But you are at the happiest time of your life, young man."

The conductor turned pale. . . . No, this self-satisfied celebrity had not wit enough to mock him.

The sun had vanished ; the heavens were overspread with purple shadow. The crowd drifted more rapidly into the Corso and back on to the Square. Long rows of girls revolved round the fountain like the spokes of a Catherine wheel. Suddenly the clamour was hushed, and through the veil of dusk the Angelus pealed from the belfry tower.

Lawyer Belotti tried to make his voice heard above it. He approached the Café arm in arm with Nello Gennari, the tenor.

" Camuzzi has left before his time ! " he cried indignantly. " What does he mean by that ! "—for the lawyer resented his enemy's absence and was no less concerned for the regularity of the latter's habits than he was for his own.

" However," he said, " Lucia, the poultry-woman, Don Taddeo with his holy din—you see, my friend, we lead a regular life."

" But the people who went into the cathedral were not the same," said Nello. " I am certain of that, for I noticed them."

Young Savezzo leant against the wall gazing at them from under his frowning, lowered brows.

" Oh yes," he said, " already yesterday this gentleman was anxious to get to know one of the persons who entered the cathedral. Let him take note that it is not easy to make her acquaintance and that others are before him."

" What does this gentleman mean ? " asked Nello, taking a rapid stride.

"The gentleman understood me perfectly."

Then, with an assumption of nonchalance, Savezzo remarked :

"We have allowed Signorina Flora Garlinda to go for a walk by herself. Is there no chivalry left among us? I shall hurry after her and entertain her with a recitation of my essay on Friendship."

"What's the matter with him?" they asked when he had gone.

"I don't understand——" stammered Nello. The lawyer wagged his forefinger.

"This does no' concern you, my friend; it concerns me, whose friend you are. This paltry fellow is afraid of me, because in certain circulars which have come under my notice, he has again usurped the title of lawyer. You must know that this son of a cheesemonger, who reeks of his origin, once described himself as lawyer on the door of his so-called office, and that I had to threaten him with legal proceedings before he removed the plate. Consequently his cringing does not blind me to the fact that he envies and hates me."

"He is a young man of great genius," protested Polli. The lawyer tried to deny this, but they reminded him of Savezzo's triumphs at the Club. Then he replied :

"The fairest genius may be marred by certain defects of character."

"My respects to the whole company," said Nonoggi, the barber, bowing so low that his hat trailed on the ground.

"My special compliments to the lawyer!"

He bowed again before Italia, grimacing so that the network of blood vessels on his face flushed convulsively.

"Oh! Oh!" said the lawyer, swelling with pride.

"If I had known," declared the barber, pressing his

piccolo more tightly under his arm, "I should have come and given you a serenade."

"Are you an artist too, Nonoggi?" asked Gaddi, the baritone.

"At your service, sir. Here we all practise the arts. If only some of the votaries were not so unworthy! I know very well to whom I am referring."

"You are referring to Chiaralunzi," said the chemist, "but we all know that he is a very good fellow."

"The tailor—a good fellow? Oh, yes! If it is a matter of making out bills, he is good. If it is a case of trying an ill-made coat on one of his customers, he is good. But wine will not teach a man to blow the tenor horn."

"Chiaralunzi is the most sober of you all."

"He? At Spaldini they refuse to have him and his band any more because they drink so much."

"That's where the trouble lies," remarked the lawyer, "you envy each other the villages in which you play, and so you are enemies. That's bad, Nonoggi."

The barber spread out his arms and bowed to the ground.

"It may be bad, but the tailor and I feel towards one another very much as do the lawyer and the municipal secretary."

The lawyer threw back his head.

"That is a different matter, my friend. In our case it is a difference of ideas! . . . Here comes your enemy. In order to reconcile you, we will offer you both a vermouth."

"No offence to the company, but that vermouth would taste too bitter in my mouth. My respects to you all! The upholsterer and my brother-in-law, Coccola, are waiting for me at the corner. Let us go, maestro!"

"What's that?" asked the maestro, starting violently.

The tailor, Chiaralunzi, approached with his horn.

He was balancing a feather boa on the outspread palm of one of his huge hands, which he held out in front of him as though fearful of crushing or even touching his delicate burden ; he stepped very cautiously, and was breathless from his exertions.

"Has Signorina Flora Garlinda gone?" he asked, setting down his horn on the pavement and removing his hat, his eyes still fixed on the boa.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but which way has the young lady gone? She will doubtless be staying out some time, as she did yesterday, and she will catch cold in the night air. I want at least to take her something to protect her throat."

"And the rehearsal?" they asked him. He reflected, gazing at the boa.

"Yes, the rehearsal."

"Your Flora must already have gone a good distance," said the tobacconist. Suddenly the conductor rose from his seat, his face suffused with a pink flush. He stretched out his hand.

"Give it to me, Chiaralunzi! I will take it to her. In any case I want to get some air."

"But—the rehearsal? You are the maestro!"

The conductor clutched his forehead and sat down again.

"I forgot . . . I was thinking of something else. . . . It was only a sudden fancy."

Achilles offered to keep the boa in his Café, but the tailor recoiled in horror.

"In the Café! What an idea!"

They all tried to persuade him, and finally he went inside and himself hung his treasure on the clothes rack ; he shifted from one foot to the other in front of it, tugging first the right and then the left side of his drooping rust-coloured moustache.

"Some one will take it. There are too many people

about here," he decided at length and he took it down again. "The best thing will be for me to take it back home. Excuse me, gentlemen!"

He left his horn, spread the boa across his two hands, and, treading very carefully, bore it back down the street whence he had come. The others shrugged their shoulders.

"In love, poor fellow!"

"The orchestra score is at my house," said the conductor. "I must hurry off and fetch it."

Cavaliere Giordano rose quickly.

"We go the same way, maestro; for I think your road lies past the inn?"

But no sooner had they reached the Corso than he said:

"I am not going in to dinner yet. Whether I dine now or later, it will be in solitude. Italia will no doubt stay with her lawyer; Gaddi has his family; Flora Garlinda puts up with what the tailor's wife gives her; and Nello—I can't imagine where that boy is always hiding. I might go to the lady at whose house I am staying, little Signora Camuzzi, but maestro, there are times, which you as yet cannot understand, when the proximity of young women is full of bitterness. If you like, I will take a look at your opera."

"Cavaliere . . . I don't know . . ."

The conductor put his hand to his throat.

"You would be the first person to see it."

The old tenor smiled gently.

"I have seen others before now, yes even—a long time ago—the manuscript of our great Rossini—which he gave me."

After a moment's silence the conductor murmured:

"You are a famous man. . . . I feel honoured."

Before the Sub-Prefecture stood Rina, the tobacco-nist's little maid; she gazed at the conductor with an

expression of mingled terror and rapture, and as he passed, her little red hand involuntarily let fall her apron, and stayed suspended in the air, but he did not heed it. Cavaliere Giordano turned round to look at her. She was biting her lip and her eyes were fixed in a tearful stare.

At the end of the Corso they turned off into the quiet square in which stood the *Promessi Sposi* and the smithy. Above the fragment of the old city wall, which rose up like a stout ivy-clad trunk between the last houses, they could see the brown rugged face of the mountain. The conductor pointed to the roof of the smithy.

“Up there.”

Built on to the roof was a low, broad structure, with a domed top, windows almost as large as the walls and lively arabesques in stucco. When they had clambered to the top of the gloomy house the conductor remarked :

“Here you will recover your breath at once, Cavaliere. There is plenty of air here.”

The old man, however, begged him to shut the windows on account of the draught.

“You are right. It blows in here from all directions. In winter I shall find it rather cold at nights. But what of that? In the daytime I am often fevered with my thoughts. I pacc up and down the room, God knows how many times ; the light of heaven streams in from every side. I feel as though I were striding through the firmament. The pealing of the bells, the strokes of the blacksmith’s hammer are wafted towards me and shape themselves into music. But perhaps it is bad music ? ”

He drew out the manuscript, balanced it in his hands and, blushing to the roots of his beard, gave it to the tenor. The latter turned over the leaves, silently moving his lips. The conductor could not contain himself.

"I will play it to you. I will play you the second act, or at any rate the finale, at any rate the duet. You must hear that !"

He seated himself at the piano and then sprang up again.

"Only one chair ! What can I do ? Oh, Cavaliere, would you really—— ? On the bed ? . . ."

After the last chord, he remained gazing down at the keys without moving. The famous singer clapped softly and said :

"Bravo, maestro !"

The conductor breathed again.

"I like it. I should like to improvise the tenor rôle"—and the Cavaliere already stood by the piano and struck the first note with his forefinger.

"You take the baritone, maestro ! Oh ! No compliments. It is getting dark, but up here there is still light enough. Come, begin !"

When they had finished, the conductor still preserved his listening attitude. At length he looked up, flushed and smiling.

"Thank you, Cavaliere, you have made me a happy man to-day."

The old man's voice had not been cracked just now. It had been firm and strong. "Where were my ears this morning ?" Not once did it quaver. The conductor was still shaking the hand of the singer.

"Never has any one sung my music as you have sung it !"

He forgot that in fact no one had ever sung it. With a fresh burst of enthusiasm he exclaimed :

"That crescendo you introduced was extraordinarily effective !"

The old tenor smiled complacently.

"Just what Verdi said when I first introduced that crescendo in *Don Carlos* ; everybody has sung it that way ever since."

"You sang to Verdi himself!"

"I was with him at Busseto; I stood by him, and he played his opera to me, as you have just played yours, maestro."

"Verdi!"

The conductor leapt up and paced the room. Cavaliere Giordano walked to the window.

"You have a wonderful view," he remarked. "All those roofs on the mountain slope, and behind in the dark those scattered lights. You are a lucky man, maestro. You are young."

"If it were not so dark, you would be able to distinguish the sea between the dim blue shapes of those mountains. It is always before me as I work, the symbol and the pledge of my future, of a far-reaching destiny, of the immensity of fame."

"You, maestro, are certainly destined to cross the sea and to return with sacks full of dollars."

"You have crossed it, Cavaliere?"

The famous tenor waved his hand, as though to emphasise the paltriness of this achievement.

"My best years were in Russia. In order to hear me sing at St. Petersburg, the people telegraphed for seats from Moscow and the Crimea. During the performance of the *Gioconda* the Tsar came on to the stage to speak to me, and on the evening of my last appearance, he sent a military band to play in front of my house and another to the entrance of the theatre. But that is all nothing compared with my recollections of the time when I was twenty. At Rome I sang in the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella with Mustafà and Rosati. We sang the Sant' Eustachio, an oratorio by Salvatore Capocci, and when I had finished the congregation began to clap furiously and even to shout. The military had to be called in to restore order."

"When you were twenty," repeated the conductor.

"Yes," said the old man ; and he added, as though to himself :

"That is nearly fifty years ago."

The eyes of the young man gazed into the distance which he had known so long to contain the sea. Was it still there ? Suddenly his yearning for it seemed utterly futile. This old man had crossed it, had returned and what remained ? He sang in a voice that had been as cracked and quavering just now as it was before. "Only the happiness of hearing my own music deceived my ear—perhaps deceived it deliberately." The conductor began to suspect that Cavaliere Giordano had planned this scene in order to make him more tolerant. "True I exposed his incapacity before them all. How contemptible ! I, a beginner, dared to do that—and he has been world-famous." He was grateful to the darkness for hiding from this old man how deeply he was blushing—for himself, for his companion, for human pride.

"I must hurry," he murmured. "The orchestra is waiting for me."

Cavaliere Giordano stumbled on the staircase.

"Take your time, Cavaliere, and pray excuse me."

The old man made haste to overtake him, anxious to prolong his respite from solitude. But he was left behind.

At the corner, by the *Promessi Sposi*, little Rina stepped out of the shadow as the conductor hurried along, and called out something, but he had already passed her and only called back : "Another time. I am extremely busy."

He reached the Corso, and lifted his hat as he ran, for lawyer Belotti, Polli, the tobacconist and Acquistapace, the chemist turned into the street on the other side.

They wagged their fingers at him reprovingly and nudged each other.

"Ah ! the maestro ! What mischief has he been up to ?"

They themselves were in quest of adventure. From time to time they stopped in front of a house and one of them whispered :

"One of them is staying up there."

"I got lodgings for one of them here," remarked the lawyer a little further on ; and all three chuckled ecstatically. The rows of ancient, blackened, sparsely lit houses, with their heavy, ornamental doorways, whence issued the odour of spice or of some handicraft ; with their balconies no broader than pulpits, their latticed windows and projecting eaves, beneath which corn-cobs and timber were drying in open lofts ; the narrow stone paths with their shady, angular projections, every defect in the paving of which was familiar to the feet of the citizens—all these seemed transformed. Everything stirred in them a childlike curiosity. They stood on tiptoe so as to peer over the red curtains into a room of the inn where the chorus-girls were sitting with their fellow-artists ; and they discussed whether the couples who were lodging there were really married. When Vittorio Baccalà, the carpenter entered the house by the next lamp-post with a gay little creature on his arm, the tobacconist sighed. Then he said : "He is right."

"There are plenty more of them," declared the lawyer, slapping him on the back.

"But where do they all come from ?" he added, as another couple strolled across a ray of light at the end of the street.

"After all, there are only thirteen ; yet the town seems full of them."

"The whole place reeks of powder," said the chemist in his honest voice. The other two sniffed.

"They lose it in the air," said the lawyer, "as insects lose the dust from their wings," and he looked round, for it seemed to him that a wing was beating above him. Yes, indeed, on the lower balcony of Filiberti's house one of them was fanning herself—a tall girl; and now the scent of her powder too was wafted towards them. But a man's form disappeared behind her into the darkness. Who was it? The tobacconist had recognised him.

"Hi! Olindo! Come out, I say!" and he pointed to the pavement with his forefinger.

"Do you want me to come and fetch you, you impudent rascal?"

Young Polli appeared at the window.

"Papa," he stammered, "this young lady wanted some incense candles to keep out the flies, and, as the shop was closed, I brought them to her."

"Come down this moment!"

The young man turned round. They saw his red hair and his eyelids quivering with embarrassment in his chalk-white face. The chorus-girl nudged him with a loud laugh.

"Run along to your papa!"

He left the balcony. The tobacconist declared:

"This is too much! If these ladies are going to start seducing our sons, may art go to the devil."

The lawyer warned him against exaggeration; by shutting up these young fellows in the nursery one only stimulated their passions. At that moment Olindo appeared at the door, and tried to slink away round the bulging house-front.

"Ah! he wants to escape."

The father had to give a little leap in order to seize his son by the shoulders. Olindo stooped respectfully in order to assist him—and Polli dragged along his victim by the coat-tails.

"A young hobbledehoy, running after women! A new type! Now I begin to suspect why those ten cigars disappeared to-day. They were sold, and the money was for this young lady. Here's something for you—and now go home and tell your mother I said she was to give you some more of the same sort."

Having placed his son in a suitable position for that purpose, Polli dismissed him with a kick. Only after he had mopped his perspiring brow did he realise that they were all laughing at him. Amid the bellows of the chemist and the gasps of the lawyer, shrill peals descended from the balcony. The tobacconist became alarmed.

"Be reasonable," he entreated, "don't wake up all the women. They are already lying half-naked by the windows. Is this a fitting sight for men like ourselves? Come away!"

"Why, it's the finest sight in the world," said the lawyer, and he refused to budge. "Your son chose the handsomest of them all—that one with the yellow hair. Only this afternoon I saw him with her on the Square. You are right, Polli, they are not for hobbledehoy. But perhaps"—he addressed himself to the figure on the balcony in a loud whisper—"the young lady will partake of a nice little supper with us at the *Luna*. I am the chairman of the Theatre Committee, and I may be able to be of service to you."

"In that case I will be with you in a moment, gentlemen," she replied. They saw her flourishing her powder-puff by the light of a candle. Gathering up her rustling petticoats, she came to the door and at once stretched out her hand to the tobacconist.

"Your son is a child," she said, "but you, sir, are a real man."

"Let us hope so," he replied in his harsh voice, with a smile that stretched from ear to ear. Then it occurred

to him to offer her his arm. The lawyer had to walk behind. He snorted.

"Really, Polli has more than his share of luck"—then, in a louder tone :

"Signorina, I had heard of you before, for you are the loveliest of them all, and it was I who arranged for your engagement."

She turned round and looked at him over the shoulder of her escort.

"Why ! It's the famous lawyer Belotti. I am happy to make your acquaintance, sir."

Suddenly she put out her tongue at him, and quickly pressed close to Polli again, bending down to him respectfully, as Olindo had done.

"What a woman !"

In his excitement the lawyer flung out his arms so far that he came into violent contact with the wall. "Oh, oh ! . . . I feel that I could commit follies for her sake."

The chemist said reproachfully :

"And yet you are loved by a woman like Italia ! For Italia, I have no hesitation in saying so, has something divine about her that this one lacks, for all her yellow hair."

"Shall I tell you something ?"

The lawyer pressed the arm of the old soldier.

"Take Italia ! You may have her. I feel that I can never be true to her or any other woman. I am fascinated by them all—I do not shrink from the word—all. As a matter of fact bourgeois constancy has always bored me. I was destined for an artist's life, and now my temperament is being revealed to me."

Therewith he left his friend to hobble along on his wooden leg as best he could, and hurried after the yellow hair and the broad, swaying hips, which were about to disappear into the Corso.

When Polli and the lawyer with the chorus-girl between them reached the straw-littered yard before the inn, they both began to shout. Polli thumped on a table.

"Hullo, there ! Here are some customers wanting a drink."

The lawyer put his hands up to his mouth and bawled.

"Hi ! Malandrini, it's time you came down, for we want a dainty little supper. First some spiced sausage and ham, then a whacking dish of macaroni—one of those dishes you use for serving up a whole sucking-pig ; then scallops in madeira . . ."

"You shall be satisfied," said the landlord, bowing unctuously. "For such guests my wife shall even prepare *poulets à la Villeroy*—a difficult but a magnificent dish."

"And I want liver in oil," declared the young lady.

"Liver in oil, in your largest frying-pan, Malandrini !" ordered the lawyer, as the landlord hurried into the house ; Polli screamed after him : "Be very careful with the wine-custard !"

The lawyer heard him from outside and called across the yard : "I will beat the eggs and mix in the marsala. I am the only person who knows how to make the custard just the right thickness."

"What is he shouting ?" asked Italia Molesin, who was walking down the Corso with Nello Gennari. He shrugged his shoulders.

"They probably mean to get drunk."

"And the lawyer is dangling after that yellow-haired Gina ! Is that man tireless ?"

"Our arrival," said Nello, "has had an exhilarating effect on the inhabitants of this town. They have suddenly found courage to give free rein to their vices."

"How revolting ! And I thought I was going to have a peaceful six weeks. I was determined to remain faithful to him ; and now, on the very same day——"

Italia's voice was tearful.

"These people force us to lead an immoral life."

"You need not tell me that," replied the young man between clenched teeth.

"Why, surely no one has deceived you ? " she asked. He murmured :

"I have deceived myself. I aimed too high. I set myself too hard a task, for which I needed to be purer than I am."

"I don't understand you."

"Oh ! I too have had to yield to the insistence of one of these townswomen."

"As if we were engaged for that !"

"Yes, we are here to make sport for them. What a dog's life."

III

"MY husband is a fine one at bell-ringing, isn't he?" demanded the verger's wife, shrugging her crooked shoulders and peering round from under her green eye-shade. "And he will stay up there and ring the bells of the convent-church under their very noses so long as their accursed theatre lasts. We shall see whether they succeed in celebrating their devil's mass."

"Don Taddeo is a true servant of God," said Fantapiè, the locksmith, crossing himself. Scarpetta, the locksmith, who, like Fantapiè, was thinking of the work in the sacristy, hastened to cross himself too. Nonoggi's wife turned up her eyes.

"And yet the whole town will be up there before long. Their legs can't carry them fast enough. Oh! If they would but trip on the steps and break their legs before Satan breaks their necks!"

"We righteous are few in number!" remarked Acquistapace's wife. "Ought we not to hold back the wretched creatures?"

Pipistrelli's wife was already brandishing her crutch-stick. "Hi! You men! Stay down here! You will find nothing up there save eternal damnation."

Galileo Belotti, who was coming out of the Café with a party of peasants, roared back through the clamour of the bells:

"Hold your jaw. The days of superstition are past. In any case no one will want to enter heaven if a scarecrow like you is standing at the gates."

With that they tramped up the steep alley, and the pious little group gazed disconsolately round the empty Square.

"To think that, in the time of the Pope, Galileo went to mass!" exclaimed the locksmith, "but, as Monsignor said when he was here last: the hopes of the Church are diminishing daily."

"Well, well, we must take action!" declared Acquistapace's wife. "Look at Don Taddeo. He sets an example by his fearlessness."

They watched him glide out at intervals from behind the leather curtain of the cathedral door, and make a dash at some boys as they turned the corner of the Corso. He dragged them furiously along and the curtain fell to behind them and himself. No sooner, however, did he emerge from his hiding-place in order to give chase to the next lot than the previous captives crept away under the curtain, and as he was dragging along the apprentice of Serafini, the pastry-cook, one of the little Chiaralunzis and Michelino Druso, the barber's son, ran out as swiftly as hares and collided with Pipistrelli's wife so violently that she fell down on the pavement.

"What a disgrace to our profession!" shouted Nonoggi's wife after young Druso; and Scarpetta, the locksmith raised his arm. But they had already vanished.

The barber's wife let fall her arms, for yonder that was surely her own husband trying to slink up the alley. A moment ago he had planted a chair in front of his shop, as though about to read the newspaper; and now, with his clarionet held tightly under his arm, he was stealing along by the wall; he waved his hand, as though to convey that he was hurrying off to a customer, but, as he turned round, one of his eyes shut tightly, as it always did when his conscience was uneasy.

"Stop, Nonoggi!"—and, as soon as his wife had got her breath, she set off in pursuit of him. He murmured

something and tried to look unconcerned, but the eye was still closed.

"Don't get excited, my love ; we must do our bit ; else what would happen to my business. My customers would say : Nonoggi, the evening was a failure, for the orchestra was poor, and all for lack of your clarionet."

And he patted her cheek with the instrument.

"The women and the priest may say what they like," he declared to the two locksmiths who had joined them, "but a barber has other things to take into consideration."

"Oh !" cried his wife, for his affectionate pats were becoming more and more violent. Suddenly, by way of proving that he had quite recovered his nerve, the barber opened the shut eye and tore off up the alley.

"We are betrayed ; I must try to prevent the worst"—and, wringing her hands, Nonoggi's wife hurried after him. The rest of the company silently counted their strength.

"There are still four of us," declared Scarpetta. Acquistapace's wife stretched out her arm from under her black shawl and pointed threateningly towards her husband's shop.

"That shall not happen to me. He is inside there making pills, and I guarantee that he will go on making them."

They nodded gloomily at one another.

"But just look at that brave, saintly Don Taddeo !" said Pipistrelli's wife. "Hadn't we better take him something to drink ?"

For yonder in the half-darkness, exhausted by his efforts and quite alone, Don Taddeo was leaning across the back of one of the cathedral lions, with his hand pressed to his forehead. At that moment, steps were heard in the steep alley, and lawyer Belotti appeared.

He was wearing a frock-coat, and, when he was still at some distance, he began to shout :

“ Don Taddeo, those bells must stop. I warn you in the name of the Committee and of the Municipality that this din must cease.”

He continued to repeat these words all the way across the Square, as though rehearsing them in preparation for a serious encounter. At length Don Taddeo saw him and rose.

“ What do you want with me ? ” his look implied ;—the clamour from the belfry drowned their voices, but the group of observers saw the two men thrust out their arms, shake their fists and turn round, as though in search of witnesses. As the pious few drew near, Don Taddeo was saying :

“ And I tell you that it is the vigil of the feast of St. Theophrastus, to whom one of the convent chapels is dedicated.”

“ A chapel ! ” yelled the lawyer. “ That’s a pretty story ! And if you chose to dedicate every tile on the roof to a different saint, may I enquire, sir, if we should have this din every day ? ”

The priest made a desperate effort to raise his weak voice :

“ I forbid you, sir, to mock at religion.”

His eyes were feverish and bloodshot, and he waved his arms so fiercely that the lawyer recoiled out of their reach. Nevertheless with his right hand he thumped his starched shirt-front.

“ In the name of the Committee, or rather in the name of the people——”

“ Who are the people ? ” asked old Fantapiè, stepping boldly up to the lawyer, who retreated another few steps. At the same time, however, he drew a deep breath.

“ I am the people ! ” he cried with conviction. “ And beware lest I ring ‘ The People’s Bell ’ ! ”

"We too have newspapers," said Don Taddeo.

"We too are the people," declared Acquistapace's wife threateningly.

"And my husband," screamed the verger's wife, "will certainly dare to call to God with the holy bells, if your actors sing songs to the devil."

Scarpetta, the locksmith, had quietly retreated behind a pillar; not for nothing had he learnt that there was a job to be done at the Town Hall. Don Taddeo and the lawyer might both be right; for church and Town Hall both needed a locksmith.

Now that he was at a safe distance from the priest, the lawyer drew off his brown straw hat with a wide flourish and said:

"You understand, sir, this is our last word! If your hireling does not cease disturbing a public ceremony—for a theatrical performance is no less—we are resolved to call in the aid of our armed force."

With that he stepped back hastily and withdrew.

The pious group pressed round the priest and demanded with one voice:

"Is it to be allowed, Reverendo?"

He took stock of their numbers and stretched out his hand.

"The measure will soon be full, my friends; we have only to wait."

Acquistapace's wife understood him.

"We are, alas! few in number, Reverendo. We have seen all our fellow-citizens climbing up there. It is scandalous! Among them were many who had promised not to go. What are we to think of Nonoggi's wife, who ran up there after her husband. Perhaps they had planned it beforehand?"

"Just what occurred to me," said the others.

"And Iole Capitani, for all your exhortations, Reverendo, could hardly wait for the time to start.

Lawyer Belotti fetched her ; it seemed a strange way for a doctor's wife to behave . . ."

Don Taddeo indicated by a pained gesture that he was already aware of it.

"Of all our good families," screamed the verger's wife, "only the Nardinis have resisted evil . . . except the Acquistapaces," she added, intercepting an angry glance from the chemist's wife.

"Our good, saintly Signora Camuzzi," said Fantapiè, the locksmith, "has also kept aloof from sin. No one can say that she has stirred from home."

They all agreed ; only Don Taddeo bowed his head and was silent. For he had seen this member of his flock slip out of the cottage of Grattalupi, the laundress, in the steep alley, catch up her skirts and hurry on. She must have climbed up to the cottage from the courtyard of the Town Hall, although the old steps were in ruins, and fled secretly in pursuit of sensual delight. Possibly then there was truth in what Evangelina Mancafede professed to know concerning Signora Camuzzi and the youngest of the actors ?

Don Taddeo sprang up. A scene which rose up once more before his mind's eye made him pale and confused.

"We shall all be ruined," he stammered, "and the worst of them all is that woman they call Italia !"

The two women nodded bitterly. Old Fantapiè exclaimed :

"She is the Babylonian woman."

"By Bacchus," remarked Scarpetta, the locksmith, "now that the lawyer, the Baron, Signor Polli and—so they say—Malandrini's boy, have all had a go at Italia, who knows whether his turn will not come next."

The two women turned away from him indignantly and he squinted into space. They were all silent—and Don Taddeo pictured her, that woman, as he had seen her through the cathedral window up to which he had

climbed because Pipistrelli had smashed one of the panes with his rod. He had not realised that from up there one could see right into one of the windows of the *Luna*, and this window was hers, and what he saw was an embrace. Don Taddeo had trembled so violently that he could hardly descend the ladder. And here in the darkness he still trembled as he recalled that picture. . . .

"Don Taddeo!" shouted Baron Torrioni, striding out of his house. "If you have time, the Baroness would be glad to see you."

Don Taddeo raised his head timidly and greeted the Baron without looking at him. Then he made off towards the Palazzo Torrioni so swiftly that they could hear his cassock flapping against his legs.

"We had forgotten the Baroness. Another pious sheep to console our shepherd," said the verger's wife.

"But the Baron"—and they peered after him—"is going to the theatre. That's clear, for he has taken off his leather gaiters. Poor Baroness! What trials she has had to endure!"

"And now it's all up with us, since that accursed Committee are going to use force!"

"Surely Pipistrelli is ringing more softly?" said his wife. "I believe they are threatening him!"

"We are men," said Fantapiè and Scarpetta; and Acquistapace's wife added:

"On this occasion so are we; as the people up there shall find out!"

They advanced across the Square in single file.

"Don Taddeo still has supporters," declared Pipistrelli's wife, as she hobbled along; and Scarpetta, in order to keep up his spirits, shouted up into the darkness of the steep alley:

"We shall see!"

As they disappeared, lawyer Belotti emerged from the

dark archway of the Town Hall and strutted over to the chemist's shop. He raised the curtain over the door and called in a loud whisper : " Come ! The coast is clear."

With a hoarse exclamation of delight, old Acquistapace rushed out, the clatter of his wooden leg echoing across the Square.

" Hush ! " said the lawyer. " Don't wake up the enemies of art ! Wasn't I crafty ? Didn't I manage it cleverly ? "

" And there was I," chuckled the chemist, " with my black coat hidden under my overall."

They nudged each other jocosely and started off arm in arm.

" Oh ! You old donkey ! "

At every other step they halted and listened for footsteps. The lawyer looked back.

" Is old Lucia up there too, I wonder ? The town seems utterly deserted. Not a soul on the Square ! Why yes ! There's Brabrà."

A ray of light which ended in the shadow of the bell-tower, fell upon the little old man, who was making low bows as though to an invisible crowd.

" You might give me a little help with Italia this evening." The chemist's voice had a note of boyish entreaty.

" Otherwise I shall soon be the last. And a man who has as many women to choose from as you have—they say that big yellow-haired girl couldn't resist you any longer."

" Oh ! people say all sorts of things," said the lawyer with a complacent titter, and he added :

" And aren't they saying anything yet about Iole Capitani ? "

" What ? You don't mean to say—— ? "

" Her husband insisted that I had sugar in my system. Sugar in a man like myself ? Well he sees now that it doesn't prevent me——"

"You are even greater than I thought, lawyer."

"Oh! . . . But let us talk of something serious. How much longer do you give the priest?"

"Not long. Your articles in *La Campana del Popolo* will have made an impression."

"You think so? I tell you, I——"

The lawyer pointed with his finger towards his shirt-front.

"—that Don Taddeo has not another week. My dear fellow, I have drawn the attention of the Loge to that affair with the key. I have also written to the bishop about the revolt at Borgo and informed him of the part played by Don Taddeo in that outburst of superstition."

"But he——"

The old Garibaldi veteran spread out his hand.

"—he himself contradicted the peasants and said to them: 'No, your madonna did not move her eyes'—and they nearly stoned him for it."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders and said between his teeth:

"Is he the enemy, yes or no? . . . And do we want to see *Povera Toniella*?"

"Indeed we do! Indeed we do!"

The chemist swung his wooden leg over the last step.

"Take care!" said the lawyer. "The lighting is not all it might be, but what could we do? We had to concentrate all our energies on the interior of the theatre. None the less, I can take in the situation. Your wife is not among the crowd who are besieging the palace of the Princess and waiting for the overture; she is among those superstitious rebels, yonder beneath the walls of the convent. Look at them all craning their necks, as though macaroni were pouring down from the belfry instead of that infernal din? Oh! they haven't time to catch us, and in a moment, my poor friend, you

will be safe in my box. . . . Hi ! you there, make way for those who have paid for their seats."

"We want to hear too," answered the crowd.

Under the archway by the side of the palace an electric light was burning.

"So much the better," said the lawyer, as he clambered up the ruined steps, the seams of his frock-coat cracking from his exertions ; "now that the lamp is placed here, one can see where one's going. It seems almost unbelievable that these people should even now continue to make a convenience of the entrance to the theatre. They really should have more sense of decency. . . ."

"At any rate the passages are well lit, lawyer, so that I need not be afraid of breaking my remaining leg ;—and what a splendid red curtain in front of the pit, with those gold tassels !"

"Mancafede lent it to us. At first he insisted that he would only sell it, and we had to threaten to take away his concession for the diligence to Cremosine. The old rascal !"

They entered the narrow corridor leading to the boxes.

"Good evening, Corvi !"—and, as the doorkeeper held out his hand : "We haven't any tickets, but you know that the box belongs to me."

"Impossible, lawyer. The box belongs to you, but before I can let you in, you must pay me the entrance money, and Signor Acquistapace must pay it too."

The old man blinked at them out of his large red face, and his stout figure barred their passage.

"Don't talk nonsense, Corvi," said the lawyer. "You know very well that you want to get that appointment at the Public Weighing Office."

"That may be, lawyer, and for that I am counting on your protection, but I can't pay the two lire for your

entrance money out of my own pocket, for I don't possess it."

"If you hadn't reduced yourself to bankruptcy three times," said the lawyer, stamping up and down and gesticulating, "there would be no need for you to pester people this evening about tickets."

"It was the will of God," said the old man, as the lawyer hurried away.

"In the meantime you can go in, Signor Acquistapace. I count upon your recommendation for the Public Weighing Office"

In the box the chemist found the widow Pastecaldi with little Amelia, but he only pressed their hands in silence, for he was overcome by the splendour of the crowded hall. Never before had the town witnessed the like! A row of lamps ran round each tier, and the arc lamp below the ceiling threw out such a dazzling light that it was impossible to see who was sitting beyond it.

"Oh! Look what an old fool has just come in down there!" shouted a voice from above, and the chemist blushed, for he recognised the voice of the servant-girl, Felicetta, upon whom he had cast furtive glances before his wife had discharged her at the suggestion of Don Taddeo. So it had not escaped her. He peered up cautiously. Felicetta kept on looking at him and laughing, at the same time bending over to whisper into her neighbour's ear. And the neighbour was Mancafede's maid, Pomponia, the worst gossip in the town!

The two of them were regaling the left side of the gallery with a feast of scandal. The confidante of the invisible and omniscient Evangelina would have been ashamed to know less than Felicetta, and so for every one of Felicetta's stories Pomponia retorted with two. The wife of Chiaralunzi, the tailor, she said, was

flaunting herself there in the stalls, and yet she had only got her seat because her husband was the lover of the actress who lodged with them. Baron Torroni did well not to bring his wife, for his box was just next to the stage and no doubt he would take advantage of the fact to exchange signs with his sweetheart, that other actress. Opposite the Baron was the wife of Doctor Capitani (the doctor, by the by, had discovered that the carpenter in the Via del Torchio, who was a widower for the third time, had a black liver !) ; she was waiting for her Nello—the handsome Nello, and until he appeared on the stage she would go on flirting with those young gentlemen, for she had of course arranged to sit next the Club box. And, would you have believed it ?—Mama Paradisi had taken the box next to Mancafede's ; and the merchant kept on poking his head under her hat, which was so big that it was continually colliding with the walls of the box. If the old folk carried on like that, surely the sins of the poor young ones might be forgiven. Rina, the tobacconist's maid, surrounded by a crowd of schoolchildren, was leaning over the top balcony and staring at the conductor's empty place. Little fool, to set her heart on a man who was deceiving her with all the actresses of the company !

“ Rina ! Don't fall over ! ” they all shouted.

“ She can't hear ; heavens, what a din ! ” Achilles was leaning out of his box and bellowing after his waiter like an ox. “ Hi ! Nonò ! I want something to drink. A nice way to behave, serving no one but the gentry ! ” In vain. The musicians started to tune their instruments. “ That Nonoggi bleats like a nanny-goat, but Allebardi, the upholsterer, bellows through his bombardon loud enough to wake the dead. . . . Oh ! there's Signorina Zampieri. So she's really going to play the harp. Who would have thought that a girl would dare. Shall we hiss ? ”

"Poor girl, how pretty she is!" said Michele, Fantapiè's boy. Carlino, the baker's man added:

"It seems that she and her mother have no money, for they could not pay my master, and they say that Nina plays the harp until her fingers bleed."

"Oh, Nina, you dear!" shouted the girls. "In her white dress! What a sweet smile she has! Who's that man talking to her, the one with the fiddle and the long black hair? . . . Mandolini of the National Bank. He is in love with her. Good luck to her! . . . But that handsome Alfo must have gone crazy; he's banging on his drum and cymbals as if every one had come only to hear him."

"He knows nothing about them, poor fellow! He is taking the place of Vittorino Baccala, the carpenter's boy, who was terrified into staying away by Don Taddeo."

"Don Taddeo threatened my Uncle Coccoia that his gout would go to his heart if he went to the theatre."

"And in order that the devil should not come and fetch away the rest of us, he keeps the bells pealing. They won't be able to begin until the bells stop ringing. Niccolo, shut that window behind you!"

"All the windows are shut; it's uncanny how loud the bells sound. Perhaps Don Taddeo is right."

"It's the east wind, that's all; and we must make a demonstration against the priest. Down with the priests!"

"Quiet up there!" the audience in the pit shouted up to the gallery. The boys round the white-aproned pastry-cook's boy retorted with whistles. There was a sound of clapping from the Club box, and the ladies in the other boxes began to laugh. Little old Giocondi bent backwards out of his and called up to the gallery across Salvatori's box:

"Were you shouting with the others, Clothilde?"

His servant-girl called back: "We shouted: Long live Don Taddeo and the actors!"

"Bravo, Clothilde! And now shout: Long live the Salvatori family!"

Laughter was heard from the boxes.

"Oh, what a wag that Giocondi is! Salvatori took away his cement-factory, and now he is taking his revenge."

Salvatori had to bow, for they were all looking towards him and clapping and laughing. Vallesi, the tax-farmer, whose box was right in front, above lawyer Belotti's, also kept on bowing to all his best tax-payers—first, straight in front, to Baron Torroni, then a little further on, to Mancafede, then round the corner, past the third empty box, to the innkeeper, Malandrini—and suddenly across to the side, to Doctor Ranucci, who quickly placed himself in front of his wife. The audience standing in the pit burst out laughing, and Galileo Belotti, the lawyer's brother, remarked loudly to the farmers round him:

"He is splendid, is the doctor, to imagine that any one wants his ugly wife. That crowns all! If one goes to Ranucci about a boil, his wife is always sitting in the waiting-room, for he fancies there's safety in numbers. He pokes in his head every other moment, and if you so much as take her hand, he pulls her back and dances about in front of her: Pappappapp. . ."

Galileo mimicked what he believed to be the intonation of every one save himself.

"If you even look at her, you may be sure that he'll cut off both your legs instead of one. Something ought to be done to cure him of his absurd jealousy."

This opinion was shared by stout Zecchini, who had once owned the bazaar and now owned only what he carried in his paunch. He undertook that his friend

Corvi would devise some cure for the surgeon, and the boon-companions who had accompanied him chuckled in anticipation. Then the crowd standing in the pit shifted apart.

"What on earth. . . . I feel as if I were dreaming. . . . It must be a joke."

But they made their entrance with as much composure as if the hall had been the drawing-room in the Via Tripoli—Raffaella, Theo and Lauretta, shepherded by Mama Farinaggi. All the occupants of the boxes stood up, there was a moment's silence, and then Galileo Belotti was heard to say :

"Good evening, ladies !"

Laughter broke out from all parts of the house. The musicians in the orchestra stood up and tried to get a glimpse of the ladies. The latter made their way through the crowd to the first row of the stalls, where there were still three empty seats. Serafini was so taken aback that he did not at once remove his hat from Raffaella's chair, but she turned her painted face towards him and gave him one of those glances which had already many times before this roused him to action. He bowed.

"Bravo, Serafini !" the gallery shouted, and Coletto, his apprentice, whistled through his fingers.

Mama Farinaggi was making strenuous efforts to get to her place in the second row. Finally Loretani, the tax-collector, the two Pernici girls and Lieutenant Cantinelli came out into the gangway so as to afford her passage. The lieutenant even raised his hand to his helmet. The waiter from the Café bustled up to offer his fruit-drinks ; and all these various individuals blocked the way, so that Malagodi, the shoemaker, and his wife could not get to their places in the first numbered bench. They exchanged disapproving comments with Crepalini, the baker—while Mama Farinaggi gave vent to shrill little screams, because a farmer had

pinched her from the other side of the gangway. Then shouts came from the gallery :

"Lauretta has the prettiest hat !"

And :

"Raffaella, you deceived me with another !"

Fat Lauretta did not look up once ; she was putting something into her mouth ; Theo put out the tip of her tongue at the gentlemen from the Club, who clapped softly ; but Raffaella gazed round at the women in the audience as though she were a complete stranger. And each of them, meeting her glance, bent over to her neighbour and, still looking at Raffaella, exclaimed : "Scandalous !" The word echoed from box to box and from tier to tier : "Scandalous ! Scandalous !" — and the men standing in the pit shouted : "Scandalous ! Scandalous !" and they beat time with their sticks. Mama Farinaggi, having wedged herself into her seat, placed her hand on her bosom, and looked protestingly in all directions. None the less, the two Pernici girls, in their dread of coming into contact with her, were sitting on top of one another, and twisting round their necks like a couple of hens in distress ; while Signora Camuzzi, in her box just by the side of the three girls, bent down and spat. Then she turned her chair right round and gazed steadfastly at the orchestra. Severino Salvatori, who was examining the stalls through his monocle, came up and placed himself between her and the three girls.

"Thank you, sir," said Signora Camuzzi in her soft voice, "thank you for your courtesy. My husband is late, but who would have believed that in this theatre a respectable woman would not be safe against insults. Don Taddeo is right in objecting to this entertainment, and in pealing the bells as though it were the day of judgment."

"It is a veritable scandal, Signora, and the whole

blame rests with that old drunkard, Corvi, who sold these ladies their tickets."

"Oh!—and my husband was intending to give him that appointment at the Public Weighing Office. He shall not have it now."

"You are stern, but just, Signora."

Complaints were also made concerning the composition of the audience. The family of one of the actors was sitting in the front row of the reserved seats. Under such circumstances it was hardly surprising that Crepalini, the baker, should have demanded a box for himself and his family.

"We had no end of trouble," declared young Salvatore, "in frustrating the plots hatched against us by the middle classes. First we made them believe that that famous third box to the right belonged to the Nardinis; and when they got wind of old Nardini's aversion to the theatre, we kept them at bay by insisting that it was reserved for the Prefect, who might be coming. Consequently the box is still empty; and that was the most we could achieve. The Filibertis and several other good families have had to do without a box, but at any rate the baker hasn't got one."

Baron Torroni and Mancafede bent over from either side.

"But those bells! One can't hear one's self speak. Oughtn't we to do something to stop them?"

"Not for the world," said Signora Camuzzi. "I should go home immediately."

"But surely you have come to hear the actors and not the bells."

"I am prepared to listen to both at the same time. One ought to reconcile one's worldly duties with one's duties to religion."

She fanned herself more vigorously. She was irritated by the behaviour of that little Zampieri girl, who gave

herself such airs behind the golden strings of her harp, and was flirting with all the men under the eyes of poor Mandolini—she evidently felt quite sure of him.

“Only to think that old Mandolini died at the very moment when he was to have been made prefect, and that his son is sacrificing his future to a designing woman !”

The gentlemen agreed with Signora Camuzzi ; but meanwhile it was noticed that the tumult had subsided and that the cause of this was lawyer Belotti, who had entered the Sub-prefect's box and was whispering excitedly. The sedate Signor Fiorio also showed signs of agitation. Finally he flung out his arms with the air of one surrendering to the inevitable, and the lawyer rushed out again. . . . Suddenly the hall was seized with perturbation. What was happening ? Was the theatre going to be shut, because Don Taddeo had the government on his side ? What an outrage ! “We are certainly behind the times in Italy !” Would the audience at any rate get back their money ? . . . All the voices were suddenly hushed, for now they saw the lawyer hurrying into the pit. Lieutenant Cantinelli had already risen, and strode off swiftly and solemnly in the lawyer's wake. “Fontana ! Capaci !” he called softly, and his two subordinates left their posts on either side of the doorway and followed him. The crowd separated to make way for the armed force, who were in full-dress uniform, with clanking swords ; at their head, puffing out his chest until his stiff shirt-front crackled, strode lawyer Belotti. He was looking straight in front of him with an air of grim determination, and no one dared to question him.

“What a personality, the lawyer !” remarked Masetti, the driver of the diligence, who had been crushed against the wall of the exit by the armed force ; and Bonometti, the barber added :

“I always knew he was a great man.”

And he pressed after them with the rest.

"What's up?" cried Galileo Belotti, trying to keep back the surging crowd. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know that the lawyer is a buffoon? Pappapapp! To think of any one taking the lawyer seriously—that crowns all!"

But his own friends, the farmers, were jostling him in the rear; he had to make way, and in a moment hundreds of feet were trampling outside and down the steps. Mama Paradisi had stood up in her box, with one daughter pressed to each side beneath the broad shelter of her hat, and was waiting to see whether it was a case of taking to flight. Mancafede, the merchant, promised her—and in the excitement of the moment he placed his withered hand on his heart—to shelter her with his own person in case of danger. The widow Pastecaldi implored her neighbour, the chemist, to shout a warning to her son, who was tuning his double bass in the orchestra.

Acquistapace replied:

"It's nothing, ma'am, the lawyer is only reducing Don Taddeo to silence."

"The lawyer is reducing Don Taddeo to silence," repeated the widow's daughter, Amelia, in her foolish dreamy voice, and she tried to look angelic and innocent in her stiff muslin dress.

In Signora Mandolini's box, Ortensi, the blind old writer, bent over to his companion and said with a titter:

"Beatrice, they are reducing the priest to silence. That reminds one of the good old days."

"We are still alive, Orlando," said the old lady in her deep voice. She was seated very erect; her black eyes sparkled in her long white face with its crown of white hair.

"Is it possible!" shouted Polli, the tobacconist, who

was standing close by, and he ran out. Old Ortensi's housekeeper immediately dropped her plump hand over the edge of the box, and when young Olindo Polli stroked it timidly, she turned towards him a face so commanding and so lascivious that the sweat broke out on his face. In spite of the confusion, the two Giocondi girls saw all that happened, and they nudged each other malignantly.

"They are all like Papa," said Cesira, turning round. Behind them her mother had bowed her dingy grey head and was already asleep again.

"It is with such women that men make families unhappy, the wife gets to look like Mama, and we don't get married."

"I am sick of the thought of marriage," said Rosina, whose engagement had been broken off. Then the door of the box opened, and old Giocondi bustled in, thrusting out his jovial little paunch. His eyes sparkled.

"All is going well," he cried, waving his hand. "They are fetching Pipistrelli down from the belfry. You shall have ices, and would you like some marsala? Come girls, kiss me, you have only had your papa back since yesterday."

"I knew you would come; blood is thicker than water," cried Cesira exultantly, hanging on to his arm. Rosina, who under the cloud of her broken engagement was left unnoticed, looked away and thought: "Look at that goose screeching and letting herself be fondled! As though that would get her a dowry! All that Papa gets from the insurance society he spends on his own amusements while he is on his business rounds; Mama and we two have to keep ourselves by taking lodgers, and when a junior official has finally been induced to propose, he breaks the engagement at the end of three years, because Papa never puts anything by for the wedding. . . ."

"Hullo, Zecchini, how goes it?" called her father into the pit. "Is he still ringing?"

"The lawyer is just appealing to him for the last time; after that the armed force will enter the bell-tower!"—and the brave old innkeeper thrust them all aside with his paunch so as to make his way out again. Others returned with news, which they shouted up to the boxes. The priest's followers had surrounded the bell-tower, but the lawyer had put them to flight! The nuns had been looking out of the convent windows from under their white, winged caps, but he had forced them to retire, because the sight of them provoked an uproar! From outside came shouts of victory, then the low, quick rustle of a crowd that is being forced to retreat, and again triumphant shouts. Then from pit to gallery there rose up a loud "Ah!"

"It has stopped! Bravo! Down with the priests!"

Some one cried:

"Long live the lawyer!"

"What's that? What lawyer?"—and Galileo Belotti shouldered and elbowed his way through the crowd. At the same moment the bells began to peal again.

"There you are!" shrieked Galileo. "Didn't I tell you that the lawyer was a buffoon! Pipistrelli has probably dropped something on his head from the belfry——"

The rest of his remarks were inaudible, for suddenly there arose outside such a howling and whistling and bellowing that the ladies in the boxes held their breath. Signora Camuzzi crossed herself.

"Don Taddeo was right. If only things would quiet down again!"—and Mancafede, who had turned very pale, peered round towards his two clerks, who were leaning wearily against the wall behind.

"This is the end of everything. One should never unchain the people. At first all their fury seems directed

against the priests, and then all in a moment it's our boxes and our money they want."

"My God, where will it end?" sighed the widow Pastecaldi, who had been deserted by the chemist. "It's we women who will be the victims."

Old Signora Mandolini, who was at her side, said in her deep voice without moving :

"Have no fear of the people, my dear ! Their hearts are noble. When my husband was to have been shot at Casena, the Pope's soldiers were forced apart by a movement of the crowd, and in the confusion a tanner of the name of Sciaccaluga took his place. Fearing they might be interrupted a second time, the soldiers shot him straight away without noticing what had happened. But my Mario escaped. The people loved him because he had loved them."

"Whatever do they want ?" asked Rosina Giocondi, her round, shining eyes gazing at the crowd from a face that was soft and transparent as gelatine. The people had leapt up and were shouting tumultuously ! They clapped and hissed and howled down the hissers ! What did she care for the priest, for whose death they were clamouring ? Of what use was lawyer Belotti, whom they were cheering ? "Neither Belotti nor Don Taddeo will marry me, and Amadeo has proved faithless."

The bells, however, were now silent ; and the turmoil too was subsiding. For in front to the left lawyer Belotti was standing behind the ledge of his box ; his stiff shirt-front was creased into folds, his wig was awry, and with his brown straw hat he was making signs that he wanted to speak. At first his heart beat so violently that he could only give vent to hoarse pants. Then came an announcement :

"At length we can say that we are free."

"Bravo !" shouted the audience, and the lawyer

bowed to gallery, pit and boxes. Then he fell into the arms of old Acquistapace and puffed out :

"I am happy, my friend, but it was hot work out there. Your wife was one of the worst. She wanted to force her way in here ; fortunately Corvi defended the boxes ; I shall see he gets that place in the Weighing Office."

"The lawyer is reducing Don Taddeo to silence," whispered Amelia Pastecaldi, her cheeks blotched crimson with excitement.

"Long live the lawyer !" shouted the gallery.

"The lawyer was quoting Garibaldi," said Camuzzi, the municipal secretary ; and above him the occupants of the Club box ironically demanded the hymn to Garibaldi. Thereupon the chemist called for it in earnest. In the certainty that his wife could not get at him, he shouted himself purple in the face, and old Signora Mandolini clapped at his side. Some one in the pit began to hiss ; it was Crepalini, the baker.

"Out with him !" shouted the gallery.

"What ?" he retorted, looking up at them from his bull-dog face. "I have paid for six places ; they cost more than a box ; can't I express an opinion ?"

"The baker is right," said Fantapiè to his fellow-locksmith, Scarpetta, in the gallery, and they both looked round threateningly.

"Do you want a good thrashing ?" asked a man in a wagoner's smock, pushing his way towards them. In the orchestra, Chiaralunzi, the tailor rapped with his horn against the stage.

"The hymn !"

"Just look !" said Baron Torrioni to Signora Camuzzi. "We won't give that man any more work."

"The gallery will give way and fall on our heads if they stamp like this," wailed Mancafede, the merchant.

"The lawyer was a fool to quote Garibaldi."

"I don't like this at all," said Signora Camuzzi, retreating to the back of the box. "What will Don Taddeo say?"

Raffaella, Theo and Lauretta had their handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths and were surveying with anxiety and disapproval the surging crowd above and behind them.

"What's this! What hymn! Pappappapp!" Galileo Belotti kept on repeating; and in the orchestra, Nonoggi, the barber, began to crow like a cock. Suddenly his wife had him by the collar and was shaking him.

"You too asked for the hymn, you heathen?"

There was a burst of laughter. In the gallery, Felicetta and Pomponia clapped their thighs and shrieked. Signora Salvatori and Signora Malandrini simultaneously pointed with their fans towards Iole Capitani's box. Everybody looked in the same direction, and even old Signora Mandolini put up her lorgnette.

"The lawyer is with Iole," they murmured to one another. "So it is true. . . . How rapturously she is gazing at him! She has lost her head, poor woman."

"Signora," said the lawyer, "I have come to lay at your feet the homage which this people has offered me."

She bent her head slightly, and glanced furtively towards the crowd, fearful and yet eager that they should see her.

"If only I had some sticking-plaster for your finger," she cooed. "It's bleeding."

The lawyer had his cue. He stepped forward.

"Fellow-citizens!" he shouted, raising himself on tip-toe in his excitement; "blood has once more been shed in the struggle for liberty; now you shall have your wish, you shall hear the hymn, which greeted the hero of liberty whenever he——"

"What's that! What hymn!" bawled Galileo Belotti.

"I don't want any hymn!" shouted Crepalini, the baker. "I want a box; I paid for six places and I haven't got a box!"

"You have spoken. I know my duty," yelled the lawyer.

"You know nothing, you buffoon!"

The lawyer shrank back. All at once the whole hall seemed to be of his brother's opinion. They laughed and shouted malignantly—and yes, that was a hiss! Pale, with lips that moved and made no sound and hurried little bows, the lawyer drew back. The doctor's wife gazed after him in horror, until with a final bow, he closed the door of the box behind him.

"What happened?" he asked when he was outside, mopping his brow. "What came over them suddenly? A moment ago they were cheering me? Who is at the back of this? . . . And just as I thought I had really made sure of Iole! Oh, fickle fortune!"

He collided with the walls of the corridor as he tottered away. A door might open and he would be discovered in his weakness! He hastened down the steps. Gladly would he have fled outside, but there too all that awaited the fallen hero was malignant curiosity! He slunk on tiptoe into the left corridor and stealthily opened the door of his box. . . . His sister was just saying to the chemist:

"He's always with the women, is the lawyer! If he were minister, he would always do everything they wanted, and that would be his ruin. . . . Here he is!"

She smiled at him with complacent admiration.

"There you see, lawyer! Naturally they were vexed, because you were with a pretty woman. I always told you that women would be the ruin of you."

Acquistapace grasped his hand, but the lawyer sat down with a groan on the unlit end of the bench.

"The lawyer is reducing Don Taddeo to silence," said an ecstatic voice at his elbow, and his niece, Amelia Pastecaldi, gazed at him with an air of affected saintliness. He bowed to her, much as in a difficult hour a man might bow before a fragrant flower, a still lake or any other innocent phenomenon of unconscious nature.

"Popular favour is fickle," he said. "Such has been the experience of every great man."

Light footsteps sounded above him : the Sub-Prefect, Signor Fiorio was returning to his box. The citizens pointed at him appreciatively ; he had acted like a statesman in keeping aloof from party squabbles. The people in the gallery thought him cowardly ; several hissed ; and then Signor Giocondi called out in his whimsical voice :

"And what about *Povera Tonietta* ?"

"Yes indeed, *Povera Tonietta*," answered the gallery, and from the pit Galileo Belotti added : "Enough of these buffoons !"

"Maestro ! Maestro !"

The gallery began to stamp.

"It's half-past nine ; we've been waiting an hour," declared Mancafede, the merchant. Signora Polli on the opposite side said :

"These actors are laughing at us."

By way of obliging her, her husband whistled. Thereupon whistles were heard from all parts of the house.

"We want *Povera Tonietta* !"

"What do I care for *Povera Tonietta*," thought lawyer Belotti and the jilted Rosina Giocondi.

"Maestro ! Maestro !"

Suddenly he appeared at the little door beneath the stage.

The audience clapped ironically and shouted :
 " Oh ! "

He hastened forward, stooping and very pale, with his hands extended awkwardly in front of him.

" Poor young man ! " said the ladies.

" What a rabble ! " he thought. " They have no idea what I have been suffering this last hour. They were making that din for a whole hour, while I was crouching back there in the dark corridor like an animal in pain. Then they call for me to come and be whistled at "

He clambered up to his revolving seat, signalled with his baton, and looked from one member of the orchestra to the other, pulling the points of his beard.

" Nonoggi, no more talking now that I am here ! . . . Signor Zampieri, be careful about your E string ! "

" He will touch the wrong string, as usual," thought the conductor. " All of them are thinking of something else. This performance is impossible. Why don't I lay down my baton and go. When one looks at this audience——"

He could not resist turning round towards them.

" One wonders for whom Viviani wrote his opera ? We musicians are few, and we ought to live in solitude. The people won't listen to us. . . . Alfo ! " he whispered fiercely, " for heaven's sake leave that kettledrum alone ! "

Very gently he added :

" Good evening, my dear Mandolini."

He let go the points of his beard and spread out his hand. In the other hand he held his baton. He drew his breath ; and it seemed to him that his revolving seat was hoisted into the air in the midst of a vast silence.

" It will not go well ; something else will happen ! "

" The hymn ! " shouted a drunken voice from the gallery. " We want the hymn ! "

"Chuck him out! Chuck him out!"

"Allebardi, you shall learn to know me!"—and the conductor leapt from his seat, his face so distorted with fury that the upholsterer dropped his eyes and busied himself with his bombardon.

. . . And finally the baton gave the signal.

"What's this? A prelude?" grumbled Galileo Belotti. "We came to see the actors!"

And, as though in obedience to his command, after two beats the curtain rose.

The gallery held its breath. Then it began to whisper.

"What do they want? . . . They want wine. Those two in front of the house have just been wed, and the others are escorting them home. . . . They sing like the girls in Pozzo when the grapes are being gathered. Do we need actors for that? But they do it better! Yes, indeed! Listen, Felicetta, what voices! I didn't think that big yellow-haired girl was good for anything but to run after the men. . . . What a din those instruments made! Allebardi was the worst. Now that they have stopped and only the children are singing, I can still hear it booming in my head. It's like the twittering of a bird after a thunderstorm. . . . Look, my little Ninetto, that boy in front is Carlino Chiaralunzi. You might be standing there and congratulating those two. Let's clap!"

"Bravo!" said stout old Zecchini, nudging his boon-companions in the pit. "That fellow is having a jolly time. Quite right, old boy! . . . And he says things out plainly, does this old man: Be fruitful, my children, beget me some grandchildren! Bravo!"

The farmers in front were explaining to one another:

"He wants the property to remain in the family. It's difficult to hear what he says, but he seems to be a sensible man. . . . Of course some woman must

interfere ! What does she want with the young husband ? Oh yes : he had better have married her. And the property ? To be sure, she's a pretty girl, prettier than the other."

"That one looks like Italia," remarked Malandrini, the innkeeper, in his box. "Now she is egging on those boys against the newly-wedded couple, saying that Tonia has deceived her Piero. For that matter she herself deceived the Baron with the lawyer and the rest."

"Hold your tongue !" said his wife, pressing her chin on to her collar and turning as red as a turkey-cock. "Hold your tongue ! You don't know what you are talking about. A man like the Baron is not interested in such——"

She bit her lips.

"What was I going to say ?" she thought. "This music makes one lose one's head and begin to prattle."

There was a titter from the gallery.

"Look at those girls ! They are looking through the window into the bedroom of the married couple. But I'm sure Tonia has not done what you say. You are jealous ! That little fair girl is right ; she is throwing a flower on the bed. Now all the others are throwing flowers. Why does that make one feel sad ?"

Mamma Paradisi and her daughters too were weeping copiously, and the widow Pastecaldi was sobbing like a child.

"It's nothing. It's just the music," explained the lawyer.

"But now the bed looks like a coffin, and they are so young !"

"So young !"

Cesira Giocondi bent down her long nose to her sister, Rosina.

"No doubt Tonietta talked as much about her furniture as you did about yours, and, mark my words, things will go wrong with her too."

Lauretta and Theo from the Via Tripoli looked touched and nodded to one another; only Raffaella winked out of the corner of her eye at the stoutest of the farmers behind her. Mama Farinaggi whispered to her tearfully from behind:

"Have you no heart?"

Signora Camuzzi turned round to her husband who had come in and was questioning her about the plot:

"Be quiet! You have no heart."

And she turned back to the tenor.

It was the first time she had taken her eyes off him. He had stood in front of the flower-bedecked house by the side of his Tonietta, and when he placed his arm round his beloved, Signora Camuzzi closed her eyes and the corners of her mouth drooped bitterly. A lock of his long, smooth, black hair hung over his brow, above the wide, short bridge of his nose. He was dressed in white and he was very pale, and this pallor and his dark, joyless eyes made it seem as though he alone among the festive crowd and at the very summit of his bliss were already conscious of impending doom.

He rushed forward because he heard his comrades speaking ill of his wife. There was an altercation; he bit the knuckles of his fingers, strode apart from the rest and up to the footlights; and the feverish pace of the drama was suddenly suspended while he sang his song: "I am deceived. Now shall I love the woman who betrayed me. I will be happy with my enemy. Tomorrow I shall speak with her lover, and happiness will be ended . . ."

"Ended," thought Signora Camuzzi. "Why did he never come back? He said that I was beautiful and

that he loved me ; and I told him that if he would creep into that dark recess under the stairway after dinner, I would come to him. He never came, and now they say that he loves others—the Baroness, the wife of Malandrini, at whose inn he is lodging, and even Mama Paradisi. I do not need his fidelity, but I have no luck. My husband might die ; I might escape from this town where no one understands me ; but I shall die here without having lived—and I hate them all ; I hate him because he refuses to help me, and Camuzzi because he stands in my way ! ”

“ . . . Happiness ends when the lie ends. It endures but a night. Let us enjoy the night ; perchance the cost of it is life, this costly night ! ”

“ This costly night ! ” repeated the chorus in a cheerful accompaniment to Piero’s threatening and anguished tones. The wedding procession returned through the fields to the village, where the vesper bell was sounding ; and the tenor in front, after the bells had ceased, could hear the flutes of the pipers, who, far off and invisible, as though in mockery or in a dream, were piping in rhythmic harmony with the surging passion of the lovers in the foreground. Now he was alone on the stage ; he held his last note, and while beneath him the tailor’s tenor horn echoed his cry, Piero clasped his temples in his two hands, took two broadlong strides, trembled convulsively and was gone. . . . In the hall the silence was so complete that Signora Giocondi’s snores became audible, but before her husband had time to pinch her, the whole audience had raised their hands and were clapping, clapping as though in pursuit of the notes that had died away. The orchestra’s attempt to go on playing exasperated them.

“ *Bis ! Bis !* ”

“ Will you be quiet ! ” hissed Signora Camuzzi to her husband over her shoulder.

"But he sang very well, my dear," said the municipal secretary. "The whole audience thinks so."

"I do not," and she bit her lip. "He is happy," she thought, "but I will have my revenge."

He appeared at the side, smiling faintly.

"*Bis ! Bis !*"

Signora Camuzzi turned round graciously to her husband.

"You are too good-natured, my friend. Your character may be such as to make a wife happy, but in public life you should be more ruthless. Why did you agree to lawyer Belotti's proposal to send for these third-rate actors? Or, if you were unable to prevent it, you ought at least to have insisted on supervising all the arrangements."

"Do you think so, my dear? The truth is that I did not believe it would succeed. I was certain that the lawyer would make a fool of himself. . . . Is your fan broken? I heard it crack."

"No. Now one course remains open to you, my friend. You can strengthen the cause of Don Taddeo. It is the good cause—and why should the lawyer be allowed to become so important? Tell me that! . . . You have heard that Crepalini, the baker, is highly indignant because he could not get a box. He is not the only one of his class who is discontented. Take up the cause of the middle classes, my Ghino!"

"What an excellent idea!" said the municipal secretary, thrusting his hand into his trouser pocket, and he puffed out his narrow chest and drew himself up very erect by the side of his much-admired wife. "Then we shall see whether the lawyer wins the day in this squabble between the parties. I don't fancy that this opera season will be played to a finish. Already I have reckoned that we shall be obliged to cut off the electric light for want of money."

“What will you do then?”

“Do? . . . I can have a talk with Fantapiè, the locksmith, who is one of Don Taddeo’s adherents and will persuade his friends to side with the priest.”

“Go along, then, my friend!”—and no sooner had he left the box than Signora Camuzzi dropped her broken fan and stamped on it. “He’s a man!” she thought, as she smiled with clenched teeth at the men who were bowing to her from the other side.

“*Bis!*” the audience shouted stubbornly.

The maestro was conducting with his arms and his body, as though fleeing before a pack of hounds; but they were at his heels, they forced him to stop. Exhausted, he lowered his baton, and the orchestra stopped playing; Tonietta withdrew swiftly into the house, and Piero came forward. He bowed and tried to retreat, but their claps brought him back again. The conductor raised his face and his baton. Then the tenor signed to him with his hand, and they could not tell whether the gesture implied acquiescence or entreaty. He resumed his former position; the chorus came back and arranged themselves; the conductor gave the signal. The young men standing in the pit, in their broad-brimmed hats and fancy neckties, witnessed with delight and satisfaction the repetition of all these wonderful things, thanks to the might of their hands, which had conquered and put back time.

When Piero had finished, the shouts of the gallery drowned the tenor horn.

“Bravo! Well done!”

Many of them looked round as proudly as though they had been singing themselves. Loretani, the municipal tax-collector, who was sitting in the second row of the stalls behind fat Lauretta, began to shout once more in his innocent enthusiasm:

“ *Bis !* ”

Immediately the young sprigs in the Club box shouted ironically : “ *Bis !* ”

And then some one hissed. Piero disappeared. The young men in the parterre clapped by way of avenging him. The boxes were indignant. A contest of tongues and hands surged through the house. Signora Camuzzi put up her handkerchief and hissed. With every hiss she drew herself up very straight and her eyes sparkled in her tense little face.

The maestro still went on conducting, smiling from the depths of his scorn.

“ We want to hear *Tonietta !* ” shouted the gallery ; and not till then did most of them realise that she was singing. She was kneeling in front of the picture of the madonna on the house, with one shoulder towards the hall.

“ It’s a prayer ! ” shouted old Giocondi. “ Silence, there ! ”

A moonbeam shone through the trees upon her loosened hair, and now they could hear that she was praying to heaven that her happiness might last. The clamour sank back from her voice like the fleshly envelope from a soul, and then she rose. The people gazed after her with half-open mouths and tender, shining eyes. “ Oh God ! ” sighed the women. Then they hung over the gallery and stretched down their hands as they clapped, that they might be a little nearer to the small figure bowing there beneath them. At the first sound of applause she had risen from her knees, listlessly, as though weary after her exaltation and still indifferent to earthly things.

“ What a voice ! *Bis !* ”

“ Now one can see that she is beautiful ! Her hair shines like a golden fleece. *Bis !* ”

Every step she took was swifter, more alert. She

stood right in front and bowed with cold acquiescence first to the gallery, then to the floor and then to the boxes. Her smile was inscrutable ; it belonged to all and to none. At intervals it faded, as her glance rested sternly on the conductor.

" *Bis ! Bis !* "

He flourished his baton inexorably. She should not get the better of him this time, no matter how long they clamoured !

" And even if no one hears a single note of the whole act, I shall play on to the end."

He glanced arrogantly at the prima donna, and did not notice how she stamped her foot as she smiled at the audience. Suddenly she ran back to the house—pointing with her finger to the conductor's place as she turned round—and knelt down.

" Bravo ! She is going to sing it again from the beginning ! "

Instead, Piero appeared, and they advanced to meet one another in the moonlight. Shouts came from the gallery :

" *Bis ! Bis !* "

" *Bis to-morrow !* " bawled Galileo Belotti, and that completed their exasperation.

The two actors stood face to face, with their arms slightly raised. Their mouths were open, but not a note could be heard.

" *Bis ! Toniotta !* "

The prima donna's clear gaze travelled over the audience, she glanced contemptuously at the conductor and shrugged her shoulders, still singing. The tenor too shrugged his shoulders, and stretched out his hand protestingly towards the house. The conductor had turned cold. He did not look up from his desk and he was conscious of a deadly solitude. For a moment he fancied that even his orchestra had deserted him and

was silent. In his flight before the hounds he had reached the edge of a precipice. Were they becoming exhausted and losing ground? . . . Very well, then! He had been on the point of dropping his hand and surrendering to them. With the left hand he wiped his brow.

"One can't hear a note! Buffoons! We paid for our places too!"

"Hush! Now we are coming to the most beautiful part!" shouted Signor Giocondi's jovial voice. And the servant-girls in the gallery shouted: "Listen to Nina's harp!"

And for her sake there was silence. Signora Zampieri in the first row of the stalls leant forward, and her face beamed as she tried to peer through the strings of the harp. Behind it, white as a flower, sat her child, who was reducing them all to silence. "We could not afford any powder, but her arms are very white." They were all silent, and only faint strains from the violins hovered round the notes of Nina's harp, which receded and vanished like moonbeams. When she ended, the moonlight on the stage would surely fade away too, and Tonia and Piero would be silent. Signora Zampieri thrust forward her shoulders in her rusty black dress, dreading the moment when the notes of the harp would cease.

"If Luciano really does get that place as assistant master, we shall almost have enough to eat. . . . Is that young Mandolini serious? He is gazing at Nina all the time over his fiddle. Go on playing, Ninetta!"

"There you see," Lauretta seated at her side was saying to Theo, "I knew that Tonia was a respectable girl and not a—— Now it seems as if he believes in her too, and they are pointing through the window at their flower-strewn bed. How touching that is!"

"But they mean to die."

"So he says, but men often say that, and we believe them until we have had a little experience."

Mama Paradisi, unseen by her daughters, bent down over the wall of the neighbouring box, and she sighed.

"Tonietta is right; we should love one another, however hard our lot."

Mancafede, the merchant, nodded, hoping that his clerk would not notice.

Rosina Giocondi turned away. "What a pack of lies! How if she hadn't brought him the house as a dowry? She does well to remind him of that: 'See, beloved, see our flower-decked house!'" A murmur spread through the house.

"Oh! There it is. I have been waiting for that all the time. . . . Hush, Elenuccia, you will never hear anything more lovely. . . . One moment, Signora; this duet is the most famous thing in the whole opera. . . . Oh! Oh! What is it? Are they still human voices? Are not the trees and the moon singing too? . . . This music is divine!"

Old Ortensi, the author, said to his friend, Signora Mandolini:

"This scene is good, for it stirs my imagination. My eyes are too weak to distinguish the stage, but as I listen I see it expand into a realm of infinite love. A whole people are embracing one another in an ecstasy of brotherly love. Their faces are more kindly and more spiritual than the faces of ordinary men. Oh! Now it opens and an angel approaches. . . . Did we not plan something of the sort, Beatrice, when we were young?"

"And we had it too!" answered the old lady. "We have it still, Orlando!"

"Not a patch on our gramophone," said Polli, the tobacconist to his wife. "We can hear Tamagno and

Berlendi ; what are these poor young folk in comparison with them ? ”

Their son, Olindo, was reflecting silently beneath his crop of red hair :

“ So much love ! Does it exist ? What must one be and do ? ”

“ Oh, Rina ! ” whispered Fantapiè’s assistant in the gallery ; “ if you don’t love me, I shall kill myself.”

“ What were you thinking of just now, Clothilde ? ” asked Doctor Ranucci, placing himself in front of his wife with outspread arms. “ I can see that you are thinking of the tenor. Oh ! If only we had stayed at home ! ”

She dropped her faded eyes and shrugged her shoulders modestly.

“ Bravo ! *Bis !* ”

The occupants of the stalls were standing up. Stretching across the two Signorine Pernici, who were crying, Lieutenant Cantinelli exclaimed ecstatically to Mama Farinaggi of the Via Tripoli :

“ That is really divine ! ”

“ Well ? We have heard it ! ”—and the young men behind, with their big hats and their fancy neckties, shook the hands of the farmers round Galileo Belotti. He grumbled :

“ Why an encore ? We shall have it again to-morrow ! ”

But no one heeded any one else. Lawyer Belotti turned from his friend, Acquistapace, to his sister, Artemisia, and panted :

“ Didn’t I tell you that this was the finest ? And I was the first to hear it—at the rehearsal ! . . . Signora,” and he bowed to Signora Mandolini across the partition wall, “ I could have told you in advance that this duet would be a success, for, without wanting to boast——”

She paid no attention, and the lawyer looked round wistfully towards his enemy, Camuzzi. He had reserved for Camuzzi the box in which Signora Mandolini was now seated ! What had happened ? Why was he not seated next to Camuzzi, who no doubt was finding fault with everything ?

"The actor and his love ! What humbug it all is !" thought Signora Camuzzi. Signora Zampieri was thinking :

"Nina, my Ninetta is doing all this !"

And once more the two came out of the house, their arms still intertwined. The conductor had already given the signal to cease playing. "Let them have it their own way ! We shall spend the night here at this rate, but I shall make no further resistance." He looked questioningly at the singers, and immediately gave the signal for the encore. This time there was not a sound in the hall, and at the end many forgot to clap. They shook their heads. "It was even more beautiful. I would not have believed it."

The prima donna and the tenor bowed to either side, and from time to time they clasped hands as though each were conveying all the applause to the other. Then they disappeared, their arms interlaced, into the house. Sounds of laughter came from the Club box.

"Out with them !"

The stage was empty and the orchestra was playing.

"The only way to indicate what is now going on inside," whispered the Sub-Prefect to the tax-farmer behind his raised hand.

In the Club box young Savezzo was reflecting :

"The melody passes from the harp to the cello, and already the effect is less platonic, and so on down to the kettledrum. I understand. I too will write an opera."

"Hush !" said lawyer Belotti anxiously, for his

sister's sobs were so loud that it seemed they must soon be heard above the music. She exclaimed tearfully :

" If Pastecaldi had only been a little less fond of wine, he would be alive now ! "

On the other side, Iole Capitani was musing tenderly :

" Poor lawyer ! Yet it seems that he loves only me."

Signorina Salvatori looked towards the Club box and meeting the eyes of young Serafini promptly dropped her own ; at her side Rosina Giocondi's eyes met those of Olindo Polli, and suddenly something tugged at her heart, something terrifying, like hope retracing a forgotten path ; meanwhile, Dante Marinelli, the shoe-maker, put his arm round his sweetheart, who was resting her own on the gallery and murmured into her dusty hair :

" I know this music, Celestina ! Didn't you once sing it to me ? "

Tall Raffaella's mocking glance travelled slowly round the overheated room.

In the pit, Bonometti, the barber and Coccola, the tailor, shook their heads.

" However do they manage it ? Nonoggi and Chiaralunzi can hardly play at all, as every one knows."

" What's that ! They can't play at all ! " declared Galileo Belotti.

" And yet it sounds all right. It seems as though if we took their places—— They are a credit to their class. Bravo, Chiaralunzi ! Bravo, Nonoggi ! "

Nonoggi's wife, sitting in the front row of the pit, said to Chiaralunzi's wife :

" Do you hear Nonoggi ? Your husband blows out his cheeks from time to time as if something wonderful were going to happen, and then the others set up a din, but my husband you can hear all the time, and he makes such droll faces, as if he were shaving some one. He's the most important of them all, take my word for it."

The tailor's wife smiled quietly and said :

"When my husband once gets to work——"

The wife of Gaddi, the baritone, seated in the third row, had for some time been casting sidelong glances at the wife of Malagodi, the shoemaker ; she looked away, then turned round again and finally summoned up courage to say :

"Now the most important part is coming ; my husband is about to appear. He is a count, the most distinguished person in the piece, and when he arrives, the story takes a tragic turn. He has a wonderful voice."

Malagodi's wife blinked at her uncomprehendingly, but the singer's wife continued :

"He is there in the wing ; that is why the music sounds so angry."

Mama Farinaggi turned round, and there were damp streaks in her rouge.

"If only he would go away again ! He has not yet appeared, and already the moon, which was so poetic, has vanished. He is certainly going to bring more trouble upon those poor young things, who love each other so dearly. I don't like that."

She started, for the loud cracking of a whip was now heard. A deep voice shouted for Piero, spurred boots tramped on to the stage, and a stout paunch in a red waistcoat became visible.

"Bravo, maestro !" shouted the young men in the rear. Encore the orchestra !"

"What next !" answered the others. "We want to see what's coming."

"What a dirty-looking fellow ! Is he a gentleman ? He might be a waggoner."

"But he has a piece of glass in his eye and a yellow beard, so he must be a gentleman."

"What fists ! What a voice ! Poor Piero ! He comes

straight from the arms of his Tonietta, and now he has to deal with this fellow. The deuce, now he's thumping on the table ; he wants some wine."

"He's drunk. And now he's telling them how he sold his cheese in the city. A fine gentleman !"

"Don't you recognise him ? He looks just like the Conte Fossoneri, of Calto, and really, when you come to look at him, he's like Baron Torroni too——"

"But Piero's voice always sounds above his, shout as he may. Piero will get the better of him. Courage, Piero !"

"He says that he has a right to our women ? That he is the master ? Oh, you cur ! Hiss him ! Hiss him !"

"Don't believe him, Piero ! He's just a braggart, as we women can see at a glance, and he has never had Tonietta."

"Down with him !"

"Things are going badly ; you are losing your head, Piero. Oh ! Now he has run into the house and wants to do something to her. How stupid men are !"

"And why are they clapping ? Because that man sang well ? But no one ought to sing such things, the devil !"

"If only one could make an end of him, before it's too late !"

"Oh ! How terrible ! Piero is dragging Tonietta out of the house. He is out of his senses ! Yes, of course you are his wife, and he oughtn't to do it ! Kneel down before the madonna ; she is a woman too, and she will bear witness to your innocence. So will we all. . . . Oh ! all in vain ; already he is dragging her down the hill, the people are all running towards the village street, and old Geronimo is standing at his door. Run to him, Tonietta ; he is your father ! . . . Is it possible he won't let you in ? The men all stick together, that's the trouble !"

"How she implores him, how she struggles ! That was how they sang when we were young, Orlando. How my heart is beating."

"Have you really always been faithful to me, Celestina ?"

"Oh, Dante ! Are you beginning to torture me again already ?"

"What a hubbub ! Just look ! The men are all against her, and those stupid girls are repeating their gossip about Toniетta and the Count. Good ! Now she has caught one of them by the throat. The big yellow-haired one ! Good, she deserves it. Oh ! but she's stronger ; and now the next one. It's no use, Toniетta, you'd better give it up !"

"Have they all gone mad in the orchestra ? It's sending me crazy ; I want to scream !"

"Quiet up there ! Chuck him out !"

"At last ! One of them is taking pity on her, that little one. Poor Toniетta ! Yes, you are right, she is a poor Toniетta. Look, now she is standing there and crying. Can't you see that she isn't wicked ?"

"I have never believed any ill of you, Pomponia."

"Nor I, Felicetta. I don't believe all the gossip I hear. Oh ! how she is crying. It makes one want to cry too."

"She is going away, through all those people, who stand there silent. She throws her skirt over her head, as though for a long journey, and barefoot too, poor little thing."

"Come here to us ! Here we are all your friends !"

"What ? The curtain falls ? But where is she going ? We must know that !"

"We shall find out. Hi, Corvi ! Your arc lamp is buzzing like a swarm of locusts and yet it doesn't give any light."

"Bravo ! Bravo all ! Bravo ! Bravo, maestro !"

"But didn't you see, Malandrini, how sorry Piero was ? He was hiding his face in his hands."

"When a man has once had a suspicion, my dear——"

"It is wrong to have suspicions. You see how one regrets them."

"Ah !" said Polli, the tobacconist, to his son, Olindo, "such things happen. Life is not a laughing matter, mark my words !"

Old Giocondi interposed :

"I actually heard of an identically similar case in Rome. A peasant had——"

"Bravo ! Bravo, maestro !"

"Coffee, ices, lemonade ! Cold water with aniseed !"

"Shall we smoke a cigarette ?"

"Bravo !"

"As chairman of the Committee, it is my duty to congratulate the performers," said lawyer Belotti. The chemist promptly advanced his wooden leg.

"I too belong to the Committee. Let's be off ! They seem to have stopped clapping."

At that moment the curtain descended for the fifth time before the conductor and his singers. Flora Garlinda immediately wrenched her hand from his.

"Thank you," she said, and she spat at him.

"Why ?" he asked, blushing crimson and yet, in his embarrassment, retaining the smile which he had displayed to the audience.

"You want to know ?"

The prima donna placed her hands on her hips and flung out her chest. A crimson flush spread over her bare skin, and her face was contorted with hate and fury.

"It is true that I know you to be quite untrained. I have learnt from some good friends who are acquainted with your past that you never really studied at a conservatoire. Is that true, maestro ?"

He turned very pale and drew back.

"But that need not have prevented you from knowing that when a song is applauded as mine was it must be encored !"

"We did encore the duet," he said, twisting his fingers.

"Don't pretend to be a child ! What use is it to me, if I have to share the applause with some one else ? I am not making any reproach against Nello."

"What's that ?" asked the young man, without taking his eye from the hole in the curtain.

"Nothing. . . He must seem to you very harmless, since you allowed his song an encore and not mine."

"But I didn't repeat my intermezzo either."

"Because no one wanted to hear it. Again : Thank you. I have got to know you ; that is something gained. Now it is your turn to get to know me."

She dashed off. The door of her dressing-room shut with a bang. Gaddi and Cavaliere Giordano shrugged their shoulders as they passed the conductor.

"After all, she is right. . . . One is an artist or one is not. . . . You might have foreseen this, maestro."

"I would not put up with it either," said Italia, fanning herself vigorously. The conductor threw up his arms.

"But none of you runs any risk of having to repeat anything !"

"If that is your opinion of us, why are we here ?"

"That was an unfortunate remark, maestro," said Italia, with a contemptuous smile. The old tenor declared :

"I did not spare myself ; that is my privilege, I think ? Any one who, like myself, has to sing a different rôle in every act——"

"Whatever is all that noise behind there ?"

The baritone hurried away.

"What do I see—lawyer?"

"I told the gentleman," shouted the inspector, "that he must not go on to the stage."

"But I am the chairman of the Committee," groaned the lawyer, raising himself from the ground. He gathered up the remains of his nosegay.

"Signorina Garlinda must have mistaken me for some one else," he remarked.

"Or she is just in a bad temper," said Gaddi. The chemist took the flowers from his friend.

"I just now told you, lawyer, that you ought to give them to Signorina Italia."

"Oh, gentlemen"—and Signor Fiorio, the Sub-Prefect, appeared in the company of the tax-collector, "you too are no doubt paying your homage to art. May one be allowed to see our *prima donna*?"

"She will deem it a great honour," replied the lawyer, bowing. "Since she has just accorded me a most gracious reception——"

Then her door opened. The singer looked out with a radiant smile.

"Prefect," and she bowed low, "I hope Your Excellency will pardon my dressing-wrapper. I am proud to welcome you. Lawyer——"

She stretched out her hand to him, palm downwards, and he eagerly pressed a kiss upon it.

"A little misunderstanding occurred just now. You will understand the excitement of a beginner, and you will believe me when I say that I am anxious not to forfeit either your praise . . . or your flowers," she added with a mischievous glance.

Signor Fiorio was eagerly assuring the actress of his wholehearted admiration.

"But—they are rather damaged," stammered the lawyer.

She stretched out her hand.

"Never mind. They come from a friend"—and she snatched the flowers from the chemist.

"If ever I have occasion to be of service to a very great singer, one of whose first appearances I have been privileged to witness——" said the Sub-Prefect.

"I am grateful for your praise, sir. . . . I cannot ask you gentlemen to be seated, for, as you see, I am just changing my dress."

Signor Fiorio took his leave. The lawyer wanted to follow the others further behind the scenes, but as he stepped on to the stage two workmen blocked his path ; they were shouting and rushing about in all directions ; and a piece of scenery which was being shoved in nearly hit him on the head, when Flora Garlinda suddenly appeared and dragged him away in time. He was thoroughly scared.

"You have saved my life ! How can I show my gratitude ?"

"By revenging me, my friend. For I think I may assume that you will be writing the criticism for *La Campana del Popolo*, and I trust you will denounce the maestro's attempt to suppress me as the cowardly act that it is."

"With pleasure," he replied, "that is to say, in order to oblige you. But really the merits of the maestro too ought not——"

"Lawyer——" She took a step backwards.

"—I am not suggesting that you should write anything contrary to your convictions. If you praise him, I shall know that you share his hatred of me. In that case we have nothing more to say to one another"

Then, as he made a gesture of horrified protest :

"Or am I mistaken ? Am I at length faced with a man who is not like the rest and can sacrifice himself in the cause of truth ? You may perhaps incur enmity. The maestro is a schemer, who, as I have discovered and

can prove, sets himself up for something other than he is, for he has never studied at a conservatoire ; and would you really be satisfied if your whole reward were the consciousness that you had obtained redress for a woman ? ”

The lawyer thrust out his chest and pressed his hands upon it.

“ In view of my experiences up to now that seems incredible,” said the prima donna, and she slowly shook her head with an expression of modest tenderness which enchanted him. Her blue eyes with their drooping lashes were like the eyes of a child. •

“ I have nothing save my art,” she said in a voice at once proud and faltering. Deeply moved, the lawyer snatched at her little hand.

“ No one appreciates better than myself, Signorina Garlinda, the feelings of one who, supported only on his own worth, has fought for a great cause, and then, as the result of covert intrigues and the fickleness of the people, finds himself forsaken and helpless. But true greatness is only revealed in moments of defeat. We two are allies in virtue of our destinies. Count on me, Signorina Flora Garlinda ! ”

He bowed low and retreated, her fingers still pressed to his lips. Then, when he could take them no further, he let them go, and the singer, her head bowed, disappeared into her dressing-room. Before the lawyer had straightened himself, something else hit him from behind. He recovered his equilibrium and mused : “ These women ! They urge us on to great deeds, which are their own reward ! . . . But, who knows——”

And he assumed a strutting gait.

“ Perhaps that young lady was meaning to offer me something else as well ? ”

“ Hullo ! lawyer ! ” called Polli after him, but his

voice was drowned in the hubbub and the noise of hammering.

"Don't worry," said young Savezzo, who was with him, "I know my way about here."

Little old Giocondi trotted gaily to the back of the stage.

"We know the dressing-rooms too. One learns these things on one's travels."

Whistling merrily he knocked at a door, winked at the two others and opened it.

"Who's that?" cried Flora Garlinda, springing up from her dressing-table. "Some one else! No! I've had enough of this! I don't know you and I want to be alone. Do you understand? I sing to you. What more do you want of me?"

"Oh, nothing at all, excuse me," Giocondi was still murmuring when the door was shut in his face. Polli said:

"That woman is a demon. Did you see? She had a face like a witch. Never will I believe that she is twenty-two years old. She painted herself so as to deceive us."

"But that is art," said young Savezzo. "It is clear that you gentlemen are not artists."

As the three of them withdrew, Chiaralunzi, the tailor, approached softly. He knocked and then waited in a stooping posture, with dangling moustache and an awestruck expression. He was holding an enormous bouquet in his outstretched hand. A clatter was heard in the dressing-room, and the prima donna rushed out and collided with the tailor, but she recoiled from the impact, while he stood firm.

"You too," she said, and then her face suddenly relaxed. "Flowers too! Well, let me have them! And now come in; I can make use of you; you can hand me my combs. I sent the woman away; she was

a fool, and I hate fools. You blew your solo very well. When you blow, one can hear that you are an honest man."

"Who is with her?" asked Polli, "I fancy——"

"Who should it be," said Giocondi. "A lover, of course. That was why she received us as she did. We were in the way."

"Shan't we find out who it is?" asked Savezzo in a tone of sullen envy.

They crept round the stage behind the scenery and on the other side they found the lawyer surrounded by a fluttering crowd of chorus-girls, who were gesticulating in front of him with their little white and brown arms; they put their heads on one side, made eyes at him and then suddenly burst out laughing in his face.

"Tell me, lawyer, as you are a friend of us women: is it fair that I should have to wear a coffee-coloured dress?"

"So it was you who saved our lives this evening? What a brave man!"

"A real gentleman, who does not refuse advance-payments to women"—with her painted face just below his mouth. But, as he made a sudden movement, she ran away and put out her tongue. Then the inspector appeared looking very fierce; they all screamed and disappeared leaving only a little mist of powder.

Polli whispered to the lawyer: "Garlinda has a lover with her; we heard her talking to a man. Who can it be?"

The lawyer made a non-committal gesture.

"Who knows?"

He drew a deep breath.

"For that matter I too came from that direction. I took a short cut across the stage and so arrived before you."

Polli opened his eyes wide. When he collected himself, he exclaimed :

" Oh ! Lawyer ! "

" I have said nothing "—and the lawyer's face beamed.

At that moment the chemist and the Sub-Prefect went past, Acquistapace trying to keep pace with Signor Fiorio despite his wooden leg, for from behind, waving her fan, Italia was approaching. The Sub-Prefect bowed.

" Signorina, you are certainly the greatest singer at whose first appearances I have been privileged to assist."

And he stroked his carefully tended beard. The chemist gave the lawyer a pinch and rolled his eyes.

" But——"

" You have changed your dress before any of the others," said Signor Fiorio, " it is amazing. And what a picturesque costume ! Are you a citizen of Romagna ? "

" I am the wife of the innkeeper, sir, of the innkeeper on the Piazza Montanara, whom I have meanwhile married in spite of his age ; merely because I wanted to triumph over my friend, Tonietta, who had taken away my Piero and who, as the result of my slanders, is now playing the harlot on the Piazza Montanara."

" That is very ill-natured of you," remarked the Sub-Prefect, " and I am sure you would not be capable of it in reality." The citizens laughed approvingly, the lawyer more heartily than any.

" No ! Certainly not ! She is far too good-hearted. You may take my word for that, sir ! "

The representative of the government looked displeased. Italia made eyes at him and the lawyer in turn, and steered the conversation on to impersonal matters.

"What can you gentlemen expect? These new operas are full of wickedness and tragedy. I ought not really to be wearing this pretty costume, for in a great city like Rome an innkeeper's wife is of course dressed like everybody else. But is one to dispense with beauty entirely?"

"Certainly not," said the Sub-Prefect with solemn fervour, and, after a moment's hesitation: "I am even here for the express purpose of paying homage to beauty; for you indeed combine art and beauty. Your life, Signorina, must be full of pleasures."

"Alas, sir, it is not all that it should be. There are many causes for complaint. Would you believe that the maestro has just struck out one of my songs? To be sure I have two in the second act, but in the first act I have none at all. He says that we are an hour and a half behind time and that I shall have my song again at the second performance. But what good is that to me? This is the first night! And why should I be the one to have my song cut? The maestro has left Garlinda every note, and he will see what thanks she will give him for it! The whole opera consists of her songs and her duets with Piero. No sooner have they met once more and lain down to sleep side by side beneath the ancient archway than the rest of us disappear . . ."

"How do they come to meet?" asked Polli.

"On the street, of course," replied Giocondi.

"How can I assist you?" asked the Sub-Prefect.

Italia made a grimace.

"What can any one do, since Garlinda has contrived it all and the maestro is in love with her?"

"The unhappy man seeks her out," continued Giocondi, "because he cannot forget her, and she accosts him as she would any other. It is a pitiful story."

"Come, come!" gasped the lawyer. "That's

impossible ! The maestro in love with the prima donna ? ”

“ Why not ? But little good will it do him, for she is cold . . . or——”

Italia’s face wore an expression of disgust.

“ —she has unnatural inclinations.”

“ Oh no ! Not so very unnatural,” retorted the lawyer with a beaming countenance.

“ As I have an opportunity of serving the greatest artist at one of whose first appearances it has been my privilege to assist,” said the Sub-Prefect, bowing to Italia, who was twisting her hips from side to side in front of him, “ I will speak to the maestro about your song, Signorina, during this interval. The young man will listen to me.”

He made a final bow. Italia hurried after him. Gaddi, the baritone, who had joined them, remarked :

“ There you see how demoralising our profession is ! Even Italia is growing spiteful.”

They heard her saying :

“ Do you really want to, sir ? Then be quick, for we only have this one interval ; the orchestra is to go on playing between the second and third acts.”

Signor Fiorio offered her his arm.

“ I shall be proud, Signorina, to restore to you what is yours.”

“ How can I thank you, sir ! ”

“ You ask me how ? Will you not rather say—where ? At the Sub-Prefecture, my little dear.”

And Signor Fiorio gently released Italia’s arm. The citizens looked after him admiringly.

“ Oh ! he knows exactly how far he can venture to go. Now he is going back to his place. How clever ! ”

Acquistapace, the chemist, could no longer contain himself ; he swore aloud. As Italia was returning, he stumped off to meet her.

"Do you know, Signorina, that that man was lying to you?"

"But Romolo!" exclaimed his friends.

"Why not! Am I to suppress the truth? Did he not address to the prima donna exactly the same compliments as to Signorina Italia?"

"But will he take my part?" said Italia, awed by the chemist's red face and trembling underlip.

"I am one of Garibaldi's veterans," he cried, taking another step and drawing a deep breath. "I understand nothing of underhand intrigues!"

Then, as she followed him entreatingly:

"But if I love any one I do it decently."

"Believe me, sir," she said in a wheedling tone, "I too sometimes dream of a great passion . . ."

"No luck, poor Romolo," said the lawyer with a broad, complacent grin.

Polli said:

"How about fetching his wife?"

Old Giocondi remarked:

"The tenor seems very agitated. He has been running to and fro in front of the curtain the whole time. Now he is looking through the hole again. Before that he even peeped through the folds, and the audience must have seen him, for they began to shout."

"Hi! Signor Nello!" shouted the lawyer.

"Let him be," said Gaddi. "He's always like that on a first night. Much better look at the Cavaliere in his fine get-up."

Cavaliere Giordano made a bow to the company and, with a dignified but trembling gesture, removed the battered felt hat from his head, which rose into a peak and was quite bald. Enveloped in his thin, faded cloak, he began to take little shuffling steps which hardly moved him from the spot. His large diamond sparkled on the hand protruding from the cloak.

"Well?" he asked, breathless from his exertions, "do you realise, Gaddi—you who understand these things—what is going to happen? This time I am going to carry everything before me! Eh? I admit, gentlemen——"

He hurried up and looked at each in turn with a fixed smile while his hands gesticulated anxiously.

"—in the first act I had no real opportunity."

And after he had waited in vain for a contradiction:

"The part of old Geronimo did not allow it. But this rôle of the beggar is something very different. Does he not bear the stamp of fallen majesty?"

"What? Are you a king?"

"I mean that he has seen great days and is conscious of an unusual destiny. When the lovers disturb him under his arch—Oh! Gentlemen! That is the decisive moment in which the tragedy of the piece and also of life is revealed. I venture to say that I am the most important figure in the opera. It was for that reason that I persistently refused to play the innkeeper's part. Innkeeper or no, I shall lavish upon the beggar the whole force of my art and my sensibility. You will admire me! What do I say! You will weep!"

"The deuce!"

"Why do I talk! You shall see it."

Cavaliere Giordano lay down under the arch at the foot of the steps leading from it. They could not see him, but they heard him cry: "Gaddi, the cue!"

"Our bedchamber! You see it, my beloved?"

The old man leapt up like a jack-in-the-box: "I was here first."

"We will seek further then," said Gaddi in his deep voice.

"No need"—and Cavaliere Giordano's long, trembling figure emerged from the shadow. With a spectral voice he quavered:

"—since I perceive that you are lovers. When I was

young as you are, my lot was easier, and Michelina, my wife, shared it. She is dead ; this stone is all I have. If you are happy you will deem it soft."

Therewith the old singer skipped out of the archway, hopped on one foot obliquely to the side, and the two halves of his cloak flapped on his half-raised arms like broken wings.

"Ha ! Ha !" cried Polli. The lawyer was smothering his laughter, while little Signor Giocondi slapped himself noisily on his fat thighs.

"Isn't that comic ! Thank heaven there'll be something to laugh at. That's what one wants."*

Cavaliere Giordano had reeled back ; he pressed his hand to his brow.

"What ? You are laughing ? But that is—— !"

He swallowed in his throat and approached them.

"But if you laugh—— I shall see. It does impress you ?"

He paced the stage with bowed head.

"Perhaps it might be taken that way too ? . . . So you will laugh !"

"You will never persuade us," said young Savezzo with knitted brows, "that there's nothing the matter with the tenor."

"What should be the matter with him ?" retorted Gaddi ; but he felt uneasy about Nello. As he strode past the curtain, he had suddenly stopped short and bent down his ear, as though trying to distinguish one single voice amid the hubbub of voices outside, and his face wore such a far-away expression that the baritone hastily went up to him, meaning to give him a shake.

"It was her voice !" thought Nello. "She is not in the box, and yet I heard her voice from that direction. Is she dead ? Is her ghost speaking to me, like the ghost of that abbess at Parma ? My God ! It is the third

box to the right, the same box ! . . . What madness ! The Cavaliere's stories do not repeat themselves, and Alba is farther from me than if she had died a hundred years ago."

He turned his head and gazed with feverish distress into his friend's face.

"Seven days of torture," he murmured. "How one goes on hoping ! It is absurd. Always trembling in the consciousness that she is near, yet never to see her—and to know in my heart that the evening is approaching on which she will appear to me, to me, who up there——"

"Hush, Nell !"

"And now is there no hope ? May she not come yet ?"

"Be quiet ! They can hear us. . . . He is asking about the third box in the first tier to the right," shouted Gaddi to the others. "Why is it empty when the house is sold out ? I must say that I too——"

"That box belongs to the Nardini family," explained Polli.

"But——" murmured the lawyer's distant voice.

Nello turned to the tobacconist, his fingers intertwined.

"Is that true ?" he asked.

"Oh ! By Bacchus !"

Then young Savezzo, from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, looked straight at the tenor and remarked with an exultant twitch of his pock-marked nose :

"I believe not. Old Nardini persisted in his refusal. That box was booked in his name in order to thwart the middle classes, who were demanding it."

"—and to whom, let us hope, it will not be given," added Signor Giocondi.

"I have worked for the people, but how do the people thank me ?" asked the lawyer, while Nello clutched his forehead.

"One thing is certain : the Nardini family are not coming," continued Savezzo. They saw the young tenor stagger, Gaddi tried to catch him, but Nello was already lying on the ground with closed eyes. The others had leapt back, and only Gaddi bent over him. Then, as they began to ask curiously : "What's wrong with him ?" the baritone retorted angrily :

"A man may be nervous, I hope. I am superstitious myself, and I don't like that one empty box."

"Yes," said Savezzo, gazing down at Nello with supercilious scorn, "these artists have very sensitive natures."

"We ought to get a doctor," declared Cavaliere Giordano.

"But it's nothing," said the chemist.

"One never knows," declared the lawyer. "I too

"A doctor !" shouted Polli, gesticulating to the workmen, who stood gaping. The conductor came running up.

"What has happened ?"—and he turned very pale.

"Nothing at all," said Gaddi, and he gave Nello a shake. "Bring some water, Dorenghi !"

The conductor put his hands in his pockets. Suddenly he threw himself on his knees beside Nello's unconscious form.

"Will he be able to sing ? Only tell me that !"

He leapt up again.

"My God, I am lost !"

Signor Giocondi nudged the chemist in the ribs and winked at the lawyer.

"For that matter, maestro," he said, "the prima donna too has refused to sing any more. She seemed very vexed, didn't she, gentlemen ?"

The conductor was silent, and the lawyer thought it necessary to step up behind him with outspread arms.

But the conductor did not swoon ; he burst into a loud laugh and began to shout in a voice which they could not recognise as his :

“ Didn’t I know it ? Didn’t I know it ? ”

Gaddi stopped rubbing Nello’s temples and stood up.

“ For heaven’s sake, be quiet ! Can’t you see that they are making game of you ? Our friend here has already opened his eyes ! ”

“ All the same,” remarked the lawyer, “ a person who, like myself, is a prey to violent emotions, cannot take their consequences too lightly. How do you feel, my friend ? ”

“ A doctor,” shouted the tobacconist behind the wings. He had run in the wrong direction, and found himself suddenly confronted with his son, Olindo, who was holding the tall, yellow-haired chorus-girl under the arms and hugging her with timid rapture. For a moment the father, though he waved his arms violently, remained fixed to the spot, as though his feet had sunk into the ground. Then he made a spring.

“ What ? You see me and still you don’t let go of her ? I’ll let you know whether I’m still your father ! ”

And his hand dealt a smacking blow first on the right and then on the left side of Olindo’s face, which depicted boundless disappointment.

“ I love her so much,” he stammered distractedly. “ I want to marry her.”

“ And you dare to tell me that ! What a type ! ”

“ But why are you hitting him ? ” asked the damsel. “ What harm has he done ? Won’t you give me a cigarette instead ! ”

“ Be off with you ! ”—and Polli raised himself on tiptoe and turned the young man round in order to plant a kick in his back. Having sent him flying, he remarked :

"I forbid you, young lady——"

"You are only jealous, old dear," she replied, pinching him under the chin. "But I still love no one but you."

"Let us hope so ! By the by, don't call out to me in the shop again. Woe betide me if my wife had been about. . . . To-morrow at three o'clock, then ! But if you don't leave my boy alone, we can no longer be friends."

"That would be terrible," she called after him. "And that cigarette ?"

"You wretched boy ! Why, are you still here ?"

For Olindo was seated on a piece of scenery, weeping.

"Instead of saving a human life by fetching a doctor, this wretched boy moans over an actress ! A woman without a halfpenny, who would never be faithful to you !"

"Oh yes, indeed she would !"

"Oh ! And the lawyer ? And the Baron ? Just ask her about them !"

"It isn't true !"—and Olindo leapt up, filled with blind, self-sacrificing courage. His father leant back, pointed with his finger to his fat chest and grinned broadly.

"Well then, ask her about me !"

At that, Olindo reddened to the roots of his red hair, dropped his eyelids and collapsed. Polli patted him on the shoulder.

"As you know your way about here so well, show me how to get out !"

Through the little door beneath the stage they reached the orchestra, which was empty. Only Nina Zampieri and young Mandolini, wholly absorbed with one another, were seated by the harp, and little old Dotti

was snoring with his clarionet under his arm. Having reached the pit, the tobacconist announced :

"We want a doctor. One of the actors is ill."

But his words were lost in the general laughter which Galileo Belotti was provoking. He was standing in front of a tiny little man who was leaning against the wall by the entrance beneath the box of the Giocondi family.

"You are humpbacked," said Galileo with raised eyebrows.

The little man started.

"What do you want? I don't know you."

"Yet I perceived at once that you are humpbacked"—and Galileo pointed his finger at him relentlessly.

"If you don't leave me in peace, I'll throw this glass at your head," cried the cripple in a shrill voice, and his hand trembled so that half the water was spilt.

"You may throw the glass at my head," answered Galileo, "but you will still be humpbacked."

"How witty he is!" said the farmers as they crowded round.

"I shall call the police!" shrieked the hunchback.

"Certainly call the police! But that won't help you; you will still be humpbacked," said Galileo, planting his feet more firmly on the spot. Stout Zecchini and his boon-companions guffawed. The people hurried in from outside to join in the laughter.

"I shall bring an action against you! You will be sent to prison! I shall ruin you!"

The dwarf's long face was green; he reeled so that his hump struck against the wall; the glass slipped from his fingers, which were contracting convulsively and there was foam on his lips.

"Even if you do all that you say," declared Galileo, "you are humpbacked and humpbacked you will remain."

He gazed round imperturbably, while his victim collapsed on to the floor. Bonometti, the barber, and Coccola, the tailor, were not pleased with the result ; they took hold of the dwarf, who was making convulsive movements with his arms, and carried him out.

Large crowds of people were gathered in front of the door. On the edge of the terrace, in the warm night air the girls were promenading beneath the evergreen oaks in long lines, bending their heads as they caught the jests of the young men. In the lamp-light by the Palace, mothers and children were collected round the ice-cream wagon. Now and then a tenor voice sang a bar from Tonietta's prayer or the solemn, soaring notes of the duet : " See, beloved, see our flower-decked house. . . . "

" What music ! " said one of the young men in large hats and fancy neckties. " The piece is sad, and yet, when one hears the music, it seems as though there were no unfortunate people left in the world. "

" All the same, they are bringing one along now, " said some one else ; and they all began shouting :

" Does any one know him ? What has happened to him ? . . . He is the notary's clerk from Spello. I was once there on business. . . . How will he manage the three hours' journey in that state ? Has he any money for a night's lodging ? Any way, Felipe, you must put him up. "

The landlord of the *Promessi Sposi* protested. On such a day, with so many visitors. Every bed was worth three lire.

" Well, I'll give one ! " said the young man. " And I am a working man, earning two lire and three-quarters a day. "

He struck himself on the breast and looked round.

" And I'll give one. "

" And I. "

They lifted the sick man on to their shoulders and ran with him down the steep street. Bursts of laughter still came from the theatre. The women in the boxes wanted to see what had happened. The two Giocondi girls cackled shrilly. Their father said to them :

"That Galileo ! His brother, the lawyer, is a personality, but he too has great talents."

Galileo, his white eyebrows raised, gloated in his success and blustered out :

"Pappappapp, surely a man may have his joke ! And you, Polli," he said to the tobacconist, who was holding his sides, "you wanted a doctor ? For the tenor ? Well, send Ranucci, and meanwhile let's make love to his wife. You shall have quite another sort of joke to laugh at."

"Doctor !" he called to the first ground-floor box on the right, "some one on the stage is dying. Quick ! You must be off."

"I can't," the doctor shouted back, placing himself in front of his wife. "Tell my colleague, Capitani !"

"He isn't here. If you don't go, the man will die. What the devil !"

Galileo shouted so loud that the audience stopped talking and gazed into the box where the doctor was fidgeting uneasily with outstretched arms. He felt that his stout person was all too slender to protect his meek little wife from those eyes.

"You ought to go," said Mama Paradisi by his side, "it seems to be serious."

On the other side he saw Signora Salvatori and Signora Malandrini exchange disapproving glances. Old Signora Mandolini tapped loudly with her fan on the ledge of her box, and the gallery shouted :

"Leave him alone ! He's a doctor for the dead, not for the living."

Constrained by public opinion, Ranucci suddenly

clutched at his hat and hurried out. Galileo Belotti started off immediately.

"Bring me handsome Alfo!" he demanded. "I need him, for I'm not handsome enough myself."

"I will introduce you to a lady you will admire."

They appeared in the box side by side. Signora Ranucci shrank back behind her fan, while Galileo bowed and sighed and handsome Alfo smiled fatuously at the crowd. They raised their hands as though about to clap, nudged each other and murmured words of encouragement. Little old Giocondi in his box just opposite exclaimed noisily :

"Oh God! I can't bear it. How droll it is! And it was my idea; yes it was I who suggested it to Galileo."

Even the jilted Rosina was convulsed with laughter; and Cesira pinched her father's arm.

"You are a priceless papa!"

Their laughter roused their mother, who lifted her dingy-grey head.

"And the rent, Ottone?" she asked in her cracked voice. "How am I to pay it?"

"Who cares about rent! This is a time for laughing."

But the daughters were suddenly silent.

"How splendid," cried their father gaily, "that this tenor should be ill! The hunchback ill, the tenor ill, every one ill except myself."

His daughters bit their lips and looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes. Their father glanced towards them uneasily.

"Or have I by chance ever been ill?"

As they were still silent :

"I broke my leg on the staircase, but that can't be called an illness."

His cheeks sagged and his voice had a note of entreaty.

"Only a short time ago at Adorna didn't I make a

bet with a commercial traveller that I would eat thirty little birds, and didn't I win the bet ? ”

Suddenly he slapped his knee once more.

“ That Galileo is already stroking her face ! Oh ! This is a different sort of comedy from the one on the stage. One ought to be there. Shall I go ? ”

“ Better stay here,” said his wife. “ Who knows what the doctor will do when he comes back. . . . There he is already.”

The audience held their breath and they heard Doctor Ranucci say : “ What are you doing ? ”

He clutched at his head.

“ You sent me to a sick man who had recovered half an hour before, and meanwhile——”

All at once he turned very red and took a threatening step forwards. The fatuous smile faded from handsome Alfo's face and he retreated to the ledge of the box. As the doctor stretched out his hand, he jumped over it on to the floor.

“ Bravo, Alfo ! ” shouted the audience, and this seemed to infuriate the doctor. He flung himself between his wife and Galileo Belotti, who, with raised eyebrows, was blustering on quite unabashed :

“ Pappappapp, sick or whole, we have made the acquaintance of your wife. My compliments, doctor, a pretty peach . . . ”

He made a choking sound, for one of the doctor's fists was in his mouth and the other was clutching at his teeth. Galileo gave vent to a stifled bellow ; then the doctor waved a tooth. Clapping was heard, then a tumult of applause, and Ranucci had to bow. Galileo had disappeared.

“ There, Ottone, you see how you would have fared ! ” said Giocondi's wife. Her husband had his hand to his cheek, as though the attack had been made on himself. He tried to catch his daughters' eyes, but Rosina was

looking at her lap, and Cesira's had a sarcastic gleam between her half-closed lids. Their father kicked away a stool and said reproachfully :

" Well, even that wouldn't have been an illness ! "

The laughter spread in bursts through the hall ; when it subsided above, it broke out below. From the gallery, which had filled up again, voices shouted :

" He's a fine fellow, is the doctor ! "

And the fathers lifted their children on to their shoulders so that they might see him. Lawyer Belotti turned ironically to his neighbours in the Club box :

" Seemingly Doctor Ranucci is to have the greatest success of the evening."

His brother, Galileo, appeared once more in the pit, refused all expressions of condolence and said :

" It was very good fun, and the tooth was a bad one."

" How hot laughing makes one ! " remarked Mama Paradisi, and while Mancafede was looking the other way she took out her scent bottle and sprayed herself under the arms.

Polli's wife was fanning herself, vigorously.

" What a heat ! Aren't they ever going to begin ? "

" And Signor Ortensi's housekeeper," whispered the tobacconist, " reeks of a certain perfume—— ! I know he is blind, but can he have lost his sense of smell too ? Not one of those girls on the stage had anything as strong. You know that, as member of the Committee, I was obliged to go and have a look behind the scenes. But, would you believe it, Olindo was prowling about there. Oh ! you rascal ! don't you stir out of that corner ! "

" The theatre is too full," said Signora Camuzzi to the semicircle of young men below her box. " The odours of the gallery reach us even here. People ought not to be allowed to eat garlic in the theatre. But

what can one expect of a Committee which allows certain ladies to be seated just in front of me."

Without looking that way, she made a movement with her head towards the stalls. Tall Raffaella had made sure of the farmer behind her and was no longer concerning herself about him. She was making eyes at the orchestra in front, and Allebardi, the upholsterer, blew into his bombardon for her gratification. But Blandini, the mechanician, outdid him by executing an original air on his clarionet.

"Nonoggi has set his heart on you," said Lauretta to Theo. "He is making faces at you."

She replied :

"I don't want him. I came here for the music, and that tenor leaves one no heart for listening to others. Oh ! I would not say no to him. Surely the madonna would not let any misfortune happen to him."

"How I sympathise with that dear young man !" whimpered Mama Farinaggi in tones of dulcet fervour ; but the Signorine Pernici shrank away towards Lieutenant Cantinelli.

"As indeed our holy religion bids us," added the owner of the house in the Via Tripoli, and she turned round, displaying her bust to the occupants of the adjacent stalls, and crossed herself.

Suddenly a whisper spread through the gallery.

"They say, Pomponia, that the tenor is dead."

"Then the prima donna is to blame for his death, Felicetta ; for it was love for her that made the poor fellow ill."

"Did your mistress tell you that ?"

The servant-girl of Mancafede, the merchant, shrugged her shoulders and put her finger to her lips.

"So he is in love with the prima donna," said Signora Salvatori to Signora Malandrini. "Evangelina knows it. For that matter, it is clear from his expressive

acting that he is almost beside himself. But she is a flirt and treats him badly."

The tax-farmer's wife bent down towards the Sub-Prefect's sister.

"I am told that the prima donna has a child by the tenor. Good morals don't exist in the theatre."

"On the contrary, my dear. They are married but won't let it be known because it would spoil the illusion."

Signora Camuzzi declared :

"That tenor—I've forgotten his name——"

She looked down at her programme.

"He is even worse than I had expected. Above all, he sings without any feeling."

"On the contrary," retorted the municipal secretary, "I fancy that his swoon was due to an excess of feeling."

"Oh yes, talking of his swoon, what do you gentlemen think? Was he obeying the orders of the Committee, or was it his own idea for making up for his lack of art?"

"How witty you are, Signora!" exclaimed young Salvatori. Young Savezzo crossed his arms and from under his bent brows observed the gleam of hatred in the lady's eyes.

Old Signora Mandolini touched her blind friend with her fan.

"Orlando, I keep on thinking of that performance of *Celimena* in the Pagliano at Florence; it must be forty-five years ago? That little Garlinda is the only person who has ever reminded me of Branzilla—of Branzilla when she was young."

"You really think so, Beatrice! It was just what I was thinking. While that girl was singing, I heard once more an old and much-loved voice; it was like a dream that vanished when one woke."

"Gennari is pleasing, but he hasn't learnt much; apparently people don't learn much nowadays; and

poor Cavaliere Giordano would have done better not to let himself be heard. "

"For when he sings, he seems all the time to be reminding us how old we are ourselves."

"Only that little Garlinda recalls the great days."

"But she is not a beauty," said the blind man's housekeeper. He exclaimed :

"Not a beauty? She is wonderfully beautiful !"

"But you can't see her !"

"Begin ! Begin !" shouted Dante Marinelli, the journeyman shoemaker, from the gallery.

"Maestro !"

And suddenly the whole gallery began stamping and shouting.

"Are they making game of us? It's shameful !"

The apprentice of Serafini, the pastrycook, blew a piercing whistle through his fingers. Lawyer Belotti stepped up to the edge of the Club box and bowed to him and to the house.

"Ladies and gentlemen, pray have patience . . . !"

They were silent, and then Crepalini, the baker, in the last row of the stalls was heard to say :

"So now the lawyer's in the Club box ! How many boxes has he? Yet I paid for six places——"

"Hush !"—and fists were shaken in the gallery.

"You are starving us to death. He is the only baker, because he bribes the gentry ; and so he can starve us with his dear bread. Go on, lawyer !"

"For," panted the lawyer, "we are still novices in these things. It is the first performance in our town for the last forty-eight and three-quarter years. Then the indisposition—which you will certainly forgive—of that young and talented singer . . ."

"Poor fellow ! Yes, we will be patient," shouted the women.

"But we will do our utmost, and in five minutes, ladies and gentlemen, you shall be satisfied."

"Bravo, lawyer!" They clapped, and Bonometti, the barber, shouted:

"He is a great man, is the lawyer."

"There's Brabrà! Bravo, Brabrà!" Suddenly they all burst out laughing, and the young men in their large hats and fancy neckties said:

"When we carried off the hunchback he was standing quite alone on the Square and paying his compliments to the moon; so we brought him back with us. You shall hear some music, Brabrà!"

And the lawyer had to look on while the little old man, as though in parody of himself, made his bows to the audience. He flourished his brimless hat, laid his hand on his heart, scraped with his foot, and, as the gallery broke into cheers, it seemed to him that the figures he had sought in the deserted streets had become a reality and were met here to applaud him.

"Really the middle classes are becoming dangerous!" said Signora Camuzzi to Baron Torroni.

For Crepalini, the baker, was continuing his protests. They saw him elbow his way through the pit, with his bulging eyes and his fierce array of teeth and, having collected a crowd, try to incite them to revolt with much furious gesticulation.

"Why are you standing down here in this crush, Friend Felipe? You don't know. Then ask Malandrini. He is the landlord of the *Luna*; you are the landlord of the *Promessi Sposi*; but only he has a box. Of course, for his wife is Polli's sister-in-law, and the tobacconist is an uncle of Doctor Capitani, whose wife is a great-niece of the mayor!"

"The gentry hold together," said Fantapiè, the locksmith, who, with his brother locksmith, Scarpetta, had

come down from the gallery ; " and the only person who can help the people is Don Taddeo."

Malagodi, the shoemaker, turned purple in the face.

" The fact is that we are the victims of nepotism. Why was I not made town-councillor ? Because Elena, my girl-apprentice, refused to do what Severino Salvatori demanded of her. The gentry make demands . . ."

" The gentry ! " snorted the baker, and his thick nutcracker head shook with wrath on his narrow shoulders. " If only they were gentry ! But just look at that Giocondi, who has now ruined his second wife and travels round as an insurance agent ! Who is more of a gentleman, he or I, the fifth largest tax-payer in the town ? But because his first wife was a Pastecaldi and sister-in-law of lawyer Belotti's sister, Giocondi has a box and I haven't. And even though one is left over, they prefer it to remain empty rather than give it to a man like myself."

" That question concerns me "—and Zecchini, the old tavern-hero, thrust his stout person through the crowd. " For if a man is to have a box because he has been a bankrupt, I should have one too."

" What's that ? Which box ? " blustered Galileo Belotti. " Don't you know that that empty box belongs to the lawyer ? Else he would only have our sister's box, Iole Capitani's and the Club box, and it is clear that a man of his importance needs a fourth."

Young Savezzo strolled into their midst as though by accident.

" We have lawyer Belotti," he declared, " as Rome had Cæsar. Isn't that enough ? In my admiration for our great man, I can easily forget that my mother and my sisters were forced to remain at home because there was no box for them."

" One must be a lamb like yourself, Signor Savezzo,"

said Fierabelli, the old ropemaker, "in order not to see that there is no justice in the world."

Druso, the barber, agreed. Bonometti, the barber, interposed: "The lawyer does a great deal for the people. As Signor Savezzo says, he is a great man."

"What's that? A great man!"—and Galileo Belotti hurried up. "If any one knows the lawyer, it is I, and I tell you that he's not even the spit of a great man!"

Signora Malagodi intervened. "I have had to take off my hat, though it cost no less than that monstrosity which Paradisi is wearing. But she is sitting in a box."

"And aren't Mancafede's clerks sitting in the box with him?" shrieked her husband. "That's how he saves their bonuses, the old skinflint!"

"The only person who can help us against the gentry is Don Taddeo," persisted Fantapiè, the locksmith. The baker shouted:

"I know some one who will help me, and that is myself."

He fetched his wife and his four children from their seats and shoved the whole crowd in front of him.

"Where are you off to, Crepalini?"

"I mean to see who owns that empty box. Come along, Malagodi."

The shoemaker too collected his family.

"We'll all come if there's going to be some sport!" cried stout Zecchini, thrusting his way through the crowd with his paunch. The whole pit began to surge and yell.

"Have you gone crazy down there?" shouted the gallery.

"Be quiet! Do you want a thrashing, you starver of the people? We can't hear a note. Louder, maestro! Drown their noise with the trumpets!"

Only now did most of them realise that the maestro was there and that he was conducting. He did not look

round, but, with head bent, moved his arms very gently, as though he were alone with his orchestra. Crepalini, the baker, who had almost reached the exit, started back, for an apple core had hit him violently on the ear. Malagodi, the shoemaker, felt something soft alight on his bald patch, and a youthful voice from above shouted exultantly :

“ Right in the middle ! ”

Suddenly the hubbub subsided. It was dark ; not a lamp was burning. They peered into each other's faces in terror. The hall was filled with a strange, muffled sound of panting and shuffling. Something fearful was going to happen ! “ What's the matter ! ” The people in the boxes sprang up. A woman cried :

“ Heavens ! I'm being murdered.”

And voices from the gallery shouted :

“ Fire ! To the doors ! We are lost.”

“ Not at all ! shouted a gasping voice, which they recognised as that of lawyer Belotti. “ It's nothing. Leave it to me ! ”

Signor Giocondi suddenly began to roar with laughter ; his daughters had to hold him down on his chair—and then the gallery too understood :

“ It was the lawyer's doing ! A practical joke. Oh, you wag ! . . . But enough ! We want some light. Where has Elenuccia gone ? . . . Bravo, lawyer ! ”

“ Do you see now that he is a great man ? ” cried Bonomezzi, the barber—while the lawyer bowed in the darkness.

Then, when it was light again :

“ Oh ! But we want the arc lamp too.”

“ Hush ! They are playing ! ”

“ There's Piero ! There he is ! Bravo ! You are handsome.”

“ Thanks be to the madonna ; he is well again ! ”

"Quiet, you women ! . . . A square in Rome, did you say ? But it's our fountain ! Only we haven't that archway, but the town ought to build it."

"So that's what's become of your Toniетta, Piero. Why did you send her away and refuse to listen to us, for she was innocent ; may I be struck blind if she wasn't !"

Bis ! Bis !

"How pale he is, Dante !"

"That is because it is night. The friends who told him what had happened to Toniетta have gone. He stands alone, his face in his cloak, and weeps. . . . He is singing. Oh ! Celestina, listen to that, listen ! I feel once more as I felt when I thought you had deceived me !"

"And at the corner ? It's she ! It's Toniетta !"

"Don't talk ! What is going to happen ?"

". . . Put your hand on my heart. I can't breathe. She has recognised him !"

"Rufini, what's your opinion ? I came into the town to sell a calf, not to cry over a made-up story. And I am not crying about it, but about my house, which was burnt down three years ago, and my little son who perished in the fire. Is it the music ? I feel as though I were once more groping through the ruins. And yet I don't want to go away, for this is the first bit of real comfort I have ever had."

"Will he believe her ? Will he ? . . . He believes her !"

"It's rather late. I wouldn't have her now."

"You have no poetry in you, Malandrini. Listen, what they are singing to one another. They fancy that they are standing before their house, as they stood on their wedding night, with the moon shining through the olive trees. One has such fancies when one loves."

"How do you know that ?"

"There, Polli, again: 'See, beloved, see our flower-decked house'!"

"But it certainly isn't a patch on our gramophone. That's a good joke: 'Let us seek our bed.' I can't see any bed, only a stone, and the sky looks like rain. Oh! they mean that they want to lie down under that arch. Well and good, but will they behave in such a way that we can allow Olindo to remain here? . . . What's up, Giocondi?"

"The beggar! There he is! Oh! Isn't the Cavaliere comical? Look at him, children! I knew him at once; he rehearsed it to me and I gave him a few hints. . . Bravo, Cavaliere!"

"Bravo! *Bis*! How they laugh! It'll be the death of me."

"Now they are alone; you can hardly see them in that shadow; and again and again they sing: 'See beloved, see our flower-decked house' . . ."

"Oh! Nina, your harp!"

"It seems hardly possible that one is still on this earth."

"It would be worth while to be unhappy if afterwards one were to be as happy as they are."

"The end. . . What's the matter? Why don't they clap? The curtain is down."

"But the orchestra is still playing. They say it's to go on playing until the actors have rested and are ready to begin again."

"Pappappapp, I'm going out to smoke a cigarette. Nothing is happening."

The young men in their big hats and fancy neckties crossed their arms and exchanged glances.

"What a lot of things are happening now! Is it possible? What a life! So that is how it will be when once the people have secured their rights."

"But this"—and Ortensi, the old writer, extended his

trembling arms, "oh ! this transcends the ecstatic love of the nation which gave birth to an angel. For this, Beatrice, is the abdication and the melancholy pomp of the hero who forsakes the land that he has conquered. The love of the dying ! Isn't that what we have in the end ? "

The old lady stroked his hand and was silent.

"What a pity," said Acquistapace, the chemist, to the widow Pastecaldi, "that General Garibaldi didn't know this music. Certainly he would have had it played when he wanted us to picture to ourselves the goal—liberty. What enthusiasm ! As I listen, I feel as if I were once more gazing into the face of the hero himself."

Young Savezzo squinted down his nose at the Club box.

"What do I care about other people's affairs and whether the people before or behind the curtain live or die. But this concerns only myself, for only I have a destiny and will triumph over those who hold me down and become mighty and famous. . . . I might have composed this music ; they have robbed me of that too."

Behind, lawyer Belotti was paying a stealthy visit to Iole Capitani's box ; he clicked his heels, looked anxiously at the ground and thought of the overthrow of Don Taddeo, the founding of a newspaper and the promotion of the gaiety and happiness of the town. "Never before have I felt how much I belong to it ! " His eyes strayed over the hips of the doctor's wife, as though they were the squares of the town, and up to her bare, plump neck. She turned round and he said :

"The man who wrote that music knew what a great man is."

Below them a woman was sobbing violently. They listened ; the sound had stopped.

"Signora Camuzzi ? Impossible. She is too well-bred ; and besides what reason could she have to sob ? "

" Oh ! Every woman has a reason for that," answered Iole Capitani, and the lawyer perceived with delight that her wavering glance was full of defenceless entreaty.

" Bravo, maestro ! "

The conductor turned round on his chair and made several quick little bows. His hair clung to his brow, and he waved his baton swiftly and perfunctorily above his colleagues in the orchestra, as though impelled by some meaningless law.

" The end sounded tragic again," thought Rosina Giocondi. " We shall see when the curtain goes up. . . . Of course, the first person to appear in front of the inn is the Conte Tancredi, who was said to have seduced Toniotta before. Piero, on the other hand, who now has to mend shoes, is being given some food by the woman who wanted to have him and who now seems to be the innkeeper's wife. She is stretching out her foot to him and trying to tempt him. Toniotta on the other side is taking it all in and she, in her turn, is flirting with Tancredi from her ruined step. Your happiness, my dears, is once more at an end. That's clear. One hopes too readily—and Olindo Polli didn't mean anything after all ; otherwise he would have paid Mama a visit during the long interval."

" Look out, Piero ! " called some one from the gallery. " He's taking her away from you ! "

" Hold your tongue ! He has seen that already. Tancredi is leaving ; all the guests are leaving ; now she will get her due."

" What, Dante ! How can you be so uncharitable towards poor Toniotta. I, your Celestina, understand her only too well."

" You understand her deceiving him, although he took pity on her ? "

" I understand what she says : you have already been unjust to me once, when I was innocent."

"But he too is right : ' Since then you have been far from innocent ! ' For she was a harlot, isn't that so ? "

"Wasn't that what he wanted ? "

"Good ! He is locking her in and going off. She deserved that."

"Don't go away, Piero ! That other man will come !" cried Celestina so loud that Nello Gennari paused and turned round. Several people in the boxes laughed. For a second he peered into the hall with the melancholy gaze proper to his rôle ; then he clasped his hands behind him and strode off into the wing. He remained standing at the edge of it. In front, Flora Garlinda was leaning on the window and singing her song : "What a release to know no more of love." It was her finest, and she sang it like an angel. No question but she would have to repeat it. . . . No ? A few claps, and a hush. "People are curious. They feel that a crisis is approaching ; probably their hearts are beating. Not a voice, not a rustle in the hall. Yes, look, Gaddi has come on, with his whip and his stout paunch, which he turns round, while he pulls up his breeches. A terrible fellow ! He is helping my Toniotta out of the window, leading her on to the street, trying to drag her away. She is still resisting ; but you may be quite sure she will go with him ; I have no luck."

"Well, my friend," said a voice behind Nello—it was the Cavaliere, who had already removed his make-up, "what do you think of my beggar ? What a success ! Eh ? "

But the young man was completely absorbed in his own reflections.

"Gaddi is splendid. ' I am not jealous as he is ; I like harlots.' It's his best song, and not a single clap. Poor fellow, he had already put up his left hand to his breast, ready to bow. But you forget that we are here to excite them. They want us to make their hearts beat

faster ; not one of them thinks of us. The third box is still empty. . . . How their eyes glow at the back there ! I seem to feel their hot breath even here. Well, you will soon be satisfied, gentlemen. Soon Italia, the traitress, will call me ; I shall rush forward ; I shall—
Oh, Alba ! ”

He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head violently with his eyes closed and covered his face with his hands.

“ Is it possible ? To all that my soul cries out not an echo of response ? To play before an empty box ? And afterwards ? What will happen afterwards ? ”

“ Here I am ! ”—and he rushed out. He felt that his trembling rage, his ghastly wretchedness passed from him to an unfamiliar crowd, to that world hidden in the darkness, whose panting was his, to whose suffering he gave utterance. As he was contending with the noble seducer, he heard low cries of anguish. Now he laid him low, and then there were shouts of joy and flowers fell on the stage beside him.

“ Were you his ? Tell me the truth ! The truth ! ”

“ Mercy ! ” cried a woman’s voice from above, but he had stabbed her.

“ I loved only you, Piero,” whispered the dying Tonia ; and the shoemaker’s sweetheart in the gallery said :

“ Do you hear that, Dante ? ”

“ Bravo ? Bravo all ! Maestro ! ”

The conductor was already on his way ; the line of actors drew him out of the wing, and only when the hand which he had seized pressed his did he notice that it was Flora Garlinda’s. As she bowed her thanks to the audience, she turned halfway towards him with a gentle, timid smile. The baritone’s round, black mouth was assuring them how touched he was ; Italia was showering coquettish glances upon the crowd who had

assembled beneath the stage and were clapping ; and Nello Gennari did nothing but let himself be pulled up and down by Cavaliere Giordano who, with his make-up removed but still in his beggar's rags, was making low bows. With his free hand he waved to the audience.

"Bravo, Cavaliere !" cried Signora Camuzzi very loud ; and Signor Fiorio returned to his box in order to pay his tribute of applause to the famous singer.

As Signora Camuzzi was about to follow her husband, young Savezzo stood before the door of her box and blocked her path.

"Signora"—and he looked her in the eyes, "the tenor's faint was genuine. He was ill because that box was empty."

As Signora Camuzzi turned pale, he squinted discreetly down his nose. She stepped back.

"Why do you tell me this ?" she asked under her breath. He pressed his hand to his heart.

"Simply in order to give you a piece of news. I hope that I am the first ?"

Her glance wandered into the hall and alighted among those who were still clapping upon young Severino Salvatori. "He wanted to marry the Nardini girl," she thought, "and he can fight. Oh, traitor ! I will have you slain. . . ."

Her brain reeled ; she sat down.

"But Salvatori is vain and will chatter. Moreover a duel is out of the question. Old Nardini will find out who has involved his granddaughter in a scandal. He is influential, and my husband will lose his post. Oh, the misery of being bound to the interests of such a man !"

She clapped and cried :

"Bravo ! Bravo Gennari !"

"I need a man," she thought, "who has a stronger

motive than vanity, who has a hatred like my own and therefore the power to hold his tongue. And he must desire the Nardini money more fiercely than that fool, Salvatori desires it ; he must be poor and ambitious and so unscrupulous."

Then she surprised the glance which the man beside her flung from beneath his puckered brows at the young tenor. The envious curl of Savezzo's mouth, the ashen pallor of his pock-marked skin and the muscles of his crossed arms filled her with joyful hope. She noticed how the slits in his patent leather shoes were smeared with blacking ; and suddenly she made up her mind.

"My husband will be looking for me outside. You must be my escort, Signor Savezzo."

"Long live the lawyer !" shouted voices behind them, and as Signora Camuzzi looked round, lawyer Belotti was standing in the centre of the line of actors and bowing to the audience. At that moment her husband appeared. She smiled at him cheerfully.

"They forget to shout : Long live the Municipal Secretary !"

"Bravo, lawyer !"—and all the gallery seemed to be hanging down in a confused heap above his head. He beamed up at them.

"Oh, my people !" he murmured.

"Stop crying, Celestina," said Dante Marinelli, the shoemaker. "They could not live any longer ; it was better that Piero made an end of it."

"But was she to blame ?"

"Or he ? It was her destiny."

"And what will ours be, Dante ?"

He put his arm round her shoulders. A stream of people making for the doors engulfed them, and, pressed to one another, they vanished with it.

"The theatre has emptied," said old Signora Mandolini. "We can go now, without risk of their

jostling you. Take my arm. We are in the corridor ; now come the steps."

"The end was really very affecting," said the housekeeper, responding over her shoulder to the glances of Polli and Giocondi.

"It was more than affecting," said the blind man. "These happenings have moved us more deeply than a love-tragedy in our own village, under our own windows, have they not, Beatrice ? Why ? What makes them great ?"

"The fact that a people sympathises with them, Orlando—a people whom we love ! For is it not the same people to whom we gave our youth. Did you hear how they urged that unhappy man to execute their sentence upon the aristocrat with the yellow beard ?"

"A token then !" cried the old writer. "A token of what we have done ! But even what we did is only a token, for again and again will humanity have to overthrow its masters, and spirit be matched against might."

"We shall be at our posts."

The old man threw back his head.

"But this Piero also kills his Tonietta. Does that mean that we shall have fought in vain and that the goal, freedom is one with death ?"

"No matter," replied his friend, "we shall fight."

They found themselves in the open.

"I am coming with you, Orlando ; for my grandson is going to take Nina Zampieri home. I am glad of it. May he marry her soon, dear little girl, so that she may no longer be an expense to her poor mother."

"Do the steps begin now, Beatrice ?"

"Yes ; and the way is so badly lit that I can hardly see more than yourself. Lean hard on me, my friend."

"It will be better if he takes my arm, Signora," said the housekeeper, thrusting herself between the old couple. "Take it, Signor Ortensi !"

And in a harsh undertone :

"Don't you speak another word to her ! You have paid no attention to any one but her the whole evening."

The old lady smiled pityingly.

"Go on in front, Orlando ! I will keep behind you."

And they proceeded slowly through the darkness.

The tobacconist exclaimed suddenly :

"Where's Olindo ?"

He came to a halt, and the Polli and Giocondi families blocked up the narrow street.

"Will you never keep an eye on your son, Clothilde ?"

Old Giocondi flung back his head and cried : "Ah !" —and his daughters looked at one another with the corners of their mouths turned down ; they too were quite aware what it meant when a young man was not to be found at such an hour.

"Woe betide him when he comes home !" concluded Polli.

Olindo, concealed behind a projection of the lawyer's house, heard it and trembled. Nevertheless, hardly had his family turned the corner than in four leaps he had reached the top of the steps and was forcing his way into the theatre. Nonoggi, the barber was hopping about behind the extinguished footlights, making faces and bending himself almost double.

"Just like the Cavaliere ! Bravo, Nonoggi !" shouted his friends, who were gathered in a corner in the front of the hall, now in semi-darkness but still redolent of the odours left behind by the citizens.

"They ought to clap us too ! What would *Povera Tonietta* have been without us, pray. Up with you, Allebardi ! Up, Blandini !"

Behind them, Olindo Polli stole through the stage door.

"What are those pictures in your music-books ?"

asked the friends. "Oh! Allebardi blows so hard into his bombardon that his upholstery feathers fly out and Lucia's hens fall down dead. Oh! Blandini, the gunner keeps his clarionet on his gun-carriage, and Nonoggi practises his flute before his shaving-glass. What faces he makes! You are great artists!"

The conductor came to look for his hat. He poked his head under all the chairs and, as he passed, they saw him stand and smile.

"Well, maestro? We showed them what we can do!" said the upholsterer.

"Yes, yes, you are fine fellows," but the conductor only touched their hands without looking at them.

"I got all that was possible out of you."

And he took up his hat from the edge of the prompter's box and ran out.

"Well I never!" said the upholsterer, and he looked at Chiaralunzi, the tailor, who had dropped his hand on a music-stand.

"He's lost his wits," declared Blandini. "The whole evening he struck me as being queer."

"And hasn't he——?" asked Nonoggi, making a gesture as though pouring something from his hand into his mouth.

The tailor found his tongue.

"He's an ill-natured man!" he said emphatically. "I was mistaken when I thought him a good man. Yet I had due warning."

"Just listen to the tailor!" cried Nonoggi. "He knows more than the maestro and all the rest of us. He will teach me to blow my piccolo."

"An ill-natured man," repeated Chiaralunzi, "he was not satisfied with my tenor horn solo, and he even insulted Signorina Flora Garlinda by not repeating her song."

"Even the Signorina!" jeered the barber. "A

pretty sort of Signorina. They say that she has sung in taverns. Take her with you, Chiaralunzi, when your band goes to play to the peasants ! ”

Speechless and purple in the face the tailor raised his hand to strike, but Nonoggi had made his escape. He found the conductor outside beneath the evergreen oaks and ran up to him with outstretched arms.

“ What a pity, maestro, that it is impossible to live peaceably with the tailor. Not a day passes but he slanders you ; he says that you’re drunk and that you grudge success to other people. Do you know, maestro ? The tailor thinks himself a greater artist than yourself ! ”

The conductor’s hat was thrust to the back of his head ; he leant against a tree.

“ Well, my friend,” he said, smiling strangely, “ everything went off well ; I am content.”

“ But the tailor——”

The conductor waved him aside. As he moved away from the tree, he reeled perceptibly.

“ So he *is* drunk,” thought the barber, “ I had no idea.”

To his amazement he saw the conductor tear down the steps. He took three at one bound, leaping lightly over the kerb-stones.

On the crooked little square by the lawyer’s house he stopped to get his breath, drew himself up and turned his face heavenwards. “ So I have seen a people ! The people for whom our Maestro Viviani wrote his opera. I knew it ; we are not alone ; a people hears us ! We awaken their souls . . . and their souls are ours ! I know now what voices are wafted through my room with the blue air when I am composing. These people mould our creations ; they feel and express themselves through us. In the music of *Povera Toniotta* they

recognised their own cadences, their gestures, their rhythm. The stupendous reality of the melodies and faces perhaps surpassed anything they had experienced. Never had they looked down from their acropolis upon such a spacious land, never seen it so full of light or of terror. Their worldly consciousness was transfigured and enlarged amid the surge of passions ; the conflict, the suffering and the bliss were all a part of the tremendous harmony of their world. The singing figures were stronger and purer than they and yet they were themselves. At that moment they were glad to be men. They loved one another. And we—and we——”

“ A drunken man ? ” said Signora Camuzzi to young Savezzo on the step below. He shrugged his shoulders.

“ The maestro—a man who thinks of nothing.”

“ But take care that my husband and the lawyer do not hear anything ; they are just in front of us, round the corner. This must be kept secret ; the interests of one of our leading families demand it. And if it only concerned Alba—I am her best friend, in so far as one can be the friend of a poor little creature who is already half a nun. And this actor has not spared even her. . . . For—we dare not hope the contrary—he has seduced her. At this moment and thanks to your information, Signor Savezzo, I understand only too well why it was that in the early dawn, at an hour when no one, least of all a lie-abed actor, is abroad, he passed through the gate into the town.”

As she heard her companion gnash his teeth, she added :

“ Each time he was pale and very much dishevelled ; it was plain how he had passed his night—but enough.”

“ What has all this to do with me ? ” he said between his teeth.

“ What ? Have you no heart ? Don't you understand that Alba must be saved and that you must save her ? ”

"I am not Jesus Christ whom she is to wed."

"Oh, sir, that is blasphemy. . . . But we can't take it upon ourselves to tell her grandfather. That would be dangerous for the poor old man ; and to warn Alba is useless, for she must be mad to have acted as she has ? There is only one remedy—to get rid of the actor."

She felt that the man beside her shook his head, and she whispered quickly :

"Oh ! With all discretion, without danger to his life."

Then they were silent and slackened their pace, for the lawyer had come to a halt below them. He turned his chest and the palm of his hand to his opponent.

"I fail to understand you, Camuzzi—although I am accustomed to hearing you say incredible things. So our performance was mediocre and provincial ? Good. The orchestra and the choruses were badly trained, and the singers some too young and some too old ? Good. And our great Viviani's *Povera Tonietta*, his masterpiece, by means of which the genius of our race has conquered the world, is poor stuff, carnival music, comic opera ? Even if that be true, yet tell me one thing : if we fail to bestir ourselves, what becomes of the life of our town, of its intellectual interests and of progress ? "

With raised voice and open mouth the lawyer awaited the answer. His companion sneered and retorted :

"Ask rather : what becomes of the satisfaction of private ambition ? "

And the lawyer, gasping for breath :

"Private ambition, sir, promotes the public weal. Have you ever known a statesman achieve greatness without his country achieving greatness too ? "

His voice had risen to a shout. The conductor heard it but waved it aside with his hand and repeated vehemently :

"We draw upon the wealth of a people, and how we

must love that people ! Will it recognise my work as its own ? From that darkened city yonder voices rise : ' See, beloved, see our flower-decked house '—— Will my opera too some day be heard in all the streets, on all their lips ? Will they call me great—because I loved them ? . . . Heavens, my brain reels. Excuse me, sir. Oh forgive me, madam ! ”

“ Why, maestro ! Pray go on in front. . . . He seems to be drunk not with wine, but with his own music, poor fellow. But you, Signor Savezzo, have less courage than I thought. What ? You would not in a good cause break a few vine-stems and drop a hint among the peasants that the culprit is the actor who is always hanging about round Villascuro ? How easy and how grateful for a man of your intelligence to excite the brute passions of one of those clowns. He himself will not realise afterwards that you were his prompter—and meanwhile the seducer will have had a warning. Oh ! nothing serious. Our peasants are too clever for that—but enough to render him harmless for the time being and to cure him of any further aspirations towards the daughters of our leading families. And the Lord, whose handmaid you will have preserved, will reward you.”

He laughed harshly.

“ I shall not risk my freedom for the Lord's sake, and I shall claim my reward not from him but from you, Signora.”

Signora Camuzzi sighed.

“ I expected as much, for I was well aware what an energetic nature you have. And if Alba is not to be the bride of a heavenly consort, better in any case she should be yours than be made miserable by that vagabond. I promise you that I will act in your interests as you will act in mine. I have something to say to Alba that will fill her with hatred of her lover and drive her into the

arms of the man who has slain him. Count upon me ! . . . We must not lag too far behind ! That fool of a maestro has joined my husband and the lawyer."

"No matter," shouted the lawyer. "You may listen, maestro. We have no secrets. It is only a little account which I am settling with our friend Camuzzi. For, Signor Camuzzi, as a little careful reflection will show, not one innovation, not one improvement, not one service to the people has been effected in this town save by myself and in opposition to you. Who objected to the repair of the parish roads and who achieved it? Who wanted to withhold from our poor women their well-deserved laundry, and who procured it for them? Of the recently concluded disputes over the electric light and the theatre I need hardly remind you. You were never in favour of doing anything whatsoever. It might be said in fact that you, Signor Camuzzi, are the spirit of negation and that I, lawyer Belotti, am the genius of action !"

"But my husband's frock-coat is better cut," said Signora Camuzzi above. "Don't you think there is something very vulgar about the lawyer?"

Savezzo replied :

"So I count upon you, madam. But if you should play me false"—he crossed his arms, and she saw his muscles swell—"then I should see that the actor betrayed all that he knows concerning the ladies of this town."

Her eyes met his threatening gaze without flinching, and she toyed with her fan.

"And concerning the men too?" she asked softly. Then she raised her head with a frank smile.

"We understand each other, Signor Savezzo, and if we never misunderstand each other we can be very strong. Who knows what we might have become—you with your great talents and I perhaps a not quite

ordinary woman—if only we had lived elsewhere, in some great city——”

He interposed :

“—among men free from prejudice, amid a fierce conflict of interests and passions. Why do you say this to me ? You force up all the bitterness from the very depths of my being. In such a city one might be a politician and set a whole world in motion, the lover of noble ladies, or a great poet giving utterance to the national conscience. I feel myself destined for all this. Here, unless a man belongs to one of the ruling families, he is of no account, and doomed to envy every one who has achieved fame.”

“ Here one has a husband who is and remains municipal secretary. Here one is forced to dissemble, to dissemble one’s pleasure, to dissemble one’s pain.”

“ And perhaps it is this dissimulation practised from year’s end to year’s end that makes us so frank with one another to-night ? ”

“ Or,” murmured Signora Camuzzi, pressing her eyelids together to keep back the tears, “ perhaps that music stirred emotions in others beside the maestro ? ”

They descended the last steps in silence. Below, the lawyer was gesticulating.

“ Should I have been the personality that all esteem me if I had not had you, Camuzzi ? Perhaps it was necessary that your opposition should stimulate my creative energy, so that laundry and theatre, parish-roads and light might come to be. At times I think to myself : If the aged representative of our political electorate should one day retire—— You make a wry face, Camuzzi, but the Cavaliere Lanzerotti will nevertheless retire, and it may be that the people will do me the honour of sending me to the capital as their deputy. Then, I think to myself, it would be well if I should find you confronting me once more in the Chamber,

Camuzzi ; for you would minister to my greatness. . . . You say that I am great in words ? You do not know, my friend, what enthusiasm is, else you would have experienced it this evening ! ”

He stretched out his hand to the pair who were approaching.

“ What do you say, Signora ? Energy and action, they are everything, and that is what the great Viviani’s music teaches us ! ”

“ A woman cannot take action,” she said ; “ and to-morrow I shall have to confess to Don Taddeo that I went to the theatre. In the meantime my guilty conscience will give me no sleep.”

“ I knew that was how it would end, my dear,” said Camuzzi.

“ And the maestro ? ” shouted the lawyer up the street. “ We have lost him ? ”

The conductor, before he rushed on, gave one more glance at the dark mass of courtyards and houses below, which seemed to him full of eager listeners.

“ Yes, I will be your benefactor ! Through me you shall become happier and filled with mutual love. A maiden will sing my song from her window ! A boy tramping along the dusty road with his basket of plaster figures will forget the heat when he hears one of my melodies ! Shall I not be like a king, whose image is on every coin, in every hand ?—and whose image is a symbol of the whole people ! ”

He ran to the bottom of the steps.

“ Then we should all be together,” remarked the lawyer ; “ and although the position of our theatre is not very central—the construction of a new municipal theatre in the centre of the town will be one of our next tasks, however much you may wring your hands, Camuzzi—on the other hand it gives us a walk which, let us hope, has been agreeable to every one.”

"We each enjoy such a walk in our own way," answered Signora Camuzzi.

She insisted on going home. They separated before her door. As the lawyer, together with Savezzo and the conductor, was about to join the animated company in the *Caf  Progresso*, he saw Flora Garlinda emerge from the steep alley. At once he made his excuses and hurried towards her through the festive crowd. She waved aside his congratulations.

"Oh ! lawyer, you are a man of your word. You want to read me your review. . . . What ? You haven't written it yet ? You have been wasting your time chattering like all the people here ? "

And, as he began to stammer :

"Oh, lawyer, I have set you so high in my estimation that you may perhaps have difficulty in living up to my opinion of you. . . . Let us go in there under the archway of the Town Hall ; it is dark there, and I hate the noisy, dressed-up crowd, with their aimless promenading. . . . Well now, tell me what you are going to write ! "

And, despite his insistence that he must collect his thoughts in the seclusion of his study :

"You will be quite right in saying most about the Cavaliere. He is famous, and undoubtedly a very great artist with a magnificent voice. Don't forget that, lawyer ! In praising Gaddi it would be no exaggeration to say that for the last ten years he has been at the zenith of his powers."

"Such praise will not excite any one's curiosity," she thought, and her clear, shrewd glance rested on the lawyer, who gasped and moved his lips, as though he were conning her words by heart.

"As for Italia, you may pay her the tribute of saying that the public was so dazzled by her beauty that they did not even notice that her two songs had been cut out.

And poor Nello affords you an opportunity of appealing to the human sympathy of your readers, for he fell down in a heavy swoon because he could not support the exertion of singing. The maestro——”

“I shan’t mention him at all”—and the lawyer made an ardent gesture. He thought: “She has not led me in here for nothing. I knew it”—and he stepped in front of her and entered the dark courtyard of the Town Hall.

The prima donna said :

“That won’t do. Say that, despite his lack of proper training, that is to say, despite the fact that he is an amateur, he was surprisingly good, so that it was not only from local patriotism that the audience approved the courtesy of the actors, who insisted that he should stand in their midst to receive his share of the applause.”

“Why, that is very near the truth !” cried the lawyer. “I admire you more and more. And concerning yourself——”

“Oh ! very little. But you must leave me to the end !”

“I shall say that Flora Garlinda is a star which for the nonce is shining over the roofs of our little town but will soon be shedding its lustre upon those of our capital—yes upon those of Paris, London and New York !”

“How talented you are, lawyer !”

“I shall add that I would fain be silent in order not to lose you too soon, but that the truth cannot be hid.”

His hand on his heart, he took a step forward ; she took one backward.

“And since that is your serious opinion, lawyer, there is no need for me to thank you. Men like yourself feel insulted if one treats them as though they had bestowed a favour when they have merely been just.”

"How well we understand one another!"—and, breathing hard, he took another step forward. She recoiled until her back touched the wall. Her arms were bent and she had thrust her hands into the pockets of her dust-cloak, with her shoulders drawn up as though she were freezing—but in a quiet, cordial voice she said :

"Therefore never for one moment did I harbour the suspicion that you were like other men, who expect the woman to repay them for their service to the artist. You have experienced in your own person the pangs of lofty ambition and the vast obligations which talent imposes upon us. I know you, lawyer. You would feel humiliated yourself by the humiliation of a woman whose spirit is akin to your own."

"How true ! he exclaimed in a smothered voice, "exactly my way of thinking ; you teach me to understand myself for the first time."

"There are not many people to whom one can speak so. Take my hand, my friend !"

The lawyer removed his own from the corner of his eye, to which he had pressed it.

"I thank you for those words, Signorina Flora Garlinda, and I dare to maintain that I deserve them."

He raised her hand between his own and solemnly dropped it.

"You grieve me, lawyer."

"Oh, pardon !"—and he bent low in order to kiss her finger-tips. Then he moved aside with a grandiose gesture. She walked past, her head on one side and her lips curved in a faint, mysterious smile.

"Such a great artist," he murmured, thrilled and awed by his own chivalry.

"You, lawyer, are worthy of a greater artist," said Flora Garlinda, and she crossed the threshold with one last, rapid stride.

"There they are," said Nello Gennari, "I will go and fetch them."

He left the table hurriedly, as though wanting to make his way through the crowd and join the prima donna and her escort, but he swerved aside from them and suddenly slipped into the courtyard of the Town Hall.

"Would any one believe"—and Acquistapace, the chemist, transfixed with amazement, smiled at the company—"that this was a great artist approaching us?"

Signor Giocondi made a grimace and remarked :

"The truth is, she looks nothing at all with her hair up."

"She has a pretty hand," said young Savezzo, and he displayed his own with its broken nails.

Italia promptly declared :

"If you always separate the four fingers in the middle, any hand becomes beautiful."

And, as she said it, she smiled at the two who were approaching. From the opposite side Camuzzi made his appearance, looking slim and elegant in a new autumn coat shaped in at the waist. Savezzo surveyed him with an expression of sombre melancholy and prophesied to the secretary that he would perspire and then catch cold. The lawyer, on the other hand, commended Camuzzi for encouraging the local tradesmen. Polli declared :

"The fact is that all of us—in short, we have all of us changed. If I am not mistaken, even your brother, lawyer——" and he motioned with his head towards the adjoining table, where Galileo Belotti and Baron Torroni were engaged in a noisy discussion with the farmers, "yes, even he is not wearing his workaday trousers."

"And as regards the women," began Lieutenant Cantinelli. The lawyer interrupted him :

"And why have we altered, gentlemen? Because, by means of our theatre, we have at length infused a little life into the town. Hence your new coat, Signor Camuzzi, with which you yourself are fighting for my cause; hence this brilliant efflorescence of our public life!"

He flung out his arms, as though to embrace the whole brightly illuminated Square and its chattering crowd.

"Never have I seen so many women in hats!" cried the chemist.

"Yet the two Signorine Pernici," resumed the lieutenant, "say that some of the hats were not ordered from them and are therefore ugly."

Each of them, without heeding the others, named the woman who seemed to him best dressed. At the back, by the wall, Flora Garlinda was asking the conductor:

"And you, maestro? Are you thinking of your fame, which will be spread abroad by *La Campana del Popolo*? For you managed to outshine all the rest of us this evening."

And he replied, smiling tenderly:

"Please forgive me if I unwittingly offended you. I do not know what others think or feel, but for me there was only one person this evening, one person, in whom beauty and greatness were combined. Flora Garlinda, we ought not to be deterred by a false modesty from speaking the truth. . . ."

His moist blue eyes glistened in his pink, troubled face. She surveyed him coldly.

"It was a great evening," he stammered. "Perhaps we were all only there in order to contribute to your greatness. But I too have lived this evening, and for that I thank them all——"

He made a trembling gesture.

"All."

The corners of her mouth drooped, as she gazed sombrely into space.

"You actually thank them," she murmured. "I hate them all, because I cannot merely despise them. I hate them, and I—love them. Perhaps I should like them to applaud me and to choke themselves in the act. Thank? Do you imagine that what they do they do to win your thanks? Can you not feel how wicked and dangerous they all are?"

She shrugged her shoulders and turned her back on him.

"The most beautiful hat——" said the lawyer, bowing solemnly to the table on the left, "Oh! only Signora Aida Paradisi has that."

The two daughters peered out from under the broad expanse of black lace which crowned their mother's head, and Mancafede, the merchant also emerged from beneath it. He lifted a glass of punch, and proposed to draw the tables together. It was done, and immediately the ladies began to ask after Nello Gennari, the tenor. They looked for him in vain.

"But would you believe it!" exclaimed the lawyer. "If that isn't a nun prowling about behind there! After midnight these holy petticoats are still abroad! Ought we to drop a hint to the ecclesiastical authorities?"

"He is so delicate, poor young man"—Mama Paradisi turned to each side in turn and tried to make her voice sound very tender and sympathetic. "No doubt he is still feeling the effects of his indisposition; or perhaps he is afraid of the night air."

Young Savezzo's eyes beneath their puckered brows were watching the tips of a white, winged cap which emerged from the shadow of the arcade and then disappeared into it once more. As handsome Alfo ran past with his coffee tray, Savezzo stopped him.

"Alfo," he whispered, "some one is stealing your Alba."

The landlord's son smiled ecstatically.

"Beautiful Alba, I am going to marry her."

"Are you so sure that she loves you?"

"Why does she come to mass every day? Simply in order that she may pass by the Café and see me."

"But she has not come for a week now."

"She has not come"—and the young man's eyes beamed fatuously—"because she is cross with me; for the last time I didn't look at her; I was busy wiping up the wine which Cimabue, the butcher had spilt. But in May I shall be twenty, and I shall marry her; she may set her mind at rest."

"Alfo, some one is seducing your Alba. It is the youngest of the actors, that tenor, who is seducing her."

Alfo shook his head complacently.

"You don't believe me?" said Savezzo. "I have seen it. The tenor fainted this evening, because all his nights have been spent down there, do you understand?"

Handsome Alfó's smile became reflective. Suddenly he bared his teeth.

"Where is the actor?"—and with a sound like a growl he thrust his hand into his trouser pocket. Savezzo drew it out again.

"If he had been here, I should not have told you; for I don't want a calamity to occur. And I may be mistaken. Possibly he has not yet seduced your Alba. If need be, I will warn you; yes, I will show you them together. But you must promise to be reasonable."

Handsome Alfó smiled once more, completely reassured.

"How she loves me, my Alba!"

Shouts of joy were heard. Achilles was carrying a tray with three bottles of Asti raised high above their

heads. Acquistapace had ordered them unobserved. As Signor Giocondi's glass was being filled by the chemist, he remarked :

"Your wife won't give you any Asti when you get home, so it is well that we should have some now."

"What a splendid time we are having !" cried the lawyer. "Who could have foretold all this a week ago ! Our brilliantly illuminated Square is full of beautiful, handsomely dressed women, and assembled here we have a company of which many a great city might be proud. Our ancient monuments are amazed to behold themselves rejuvenated by the surging life which streams around them. The blood pulses vigorously through the veins of our town, and woe to him——"

He made a movement with his arm towards the cathedral.

"—who dared attempt to check the march of progress."

The others too were at this festive moment confident that Don Taddeo would have to give up the bucket. Camuzzi alone expressed his doubts. The middle classes were dissatisfied ; they were threatening to strengthen the ranks of the clerical opposition. Amid all this splendour, added the secretary, a dark cloud was threatening. No one heeded him. The chemist flourished his glass in front of the *prima donna*.

"Long live *Povera Tonietta* ! I never imagined that I should again witness such a day ; such a day as we had in the times of Garibaldi. The lawyer is right : we live in a little town, but what great events we are witnessing !"

They drank to one another and to the farmers seated at the next table. Galileo Belotti and Baron Torroni came over with their glasses and invited the ladies to do them and their company the honour of a visit. Italia was just swearing to the chemist that she would

never set foot in the Sub-Prefecture. Galileo bowed and pulled her by the arm, and she followed him, though with every step she glanced fondly towards the chemist, who blushed.

The conductor suddenly noticed that on his left Cavaliere Giordano, with hanging lip and crumpled shirt-front, was staring vacantly into space.

"Your performance was splendid, Cavaliere," he said warmly ; "it was really affecting ; I thank you."

The old singer waved his hand with a tired, mocking smile.

"I oughtn't to have done it," he said. •

"But you are a great artist !" said the conductor in alarm. "If there are evenings on which you do not feel quite up to your wonted level——"

The famous tenor laid his hand on the other's arm.

"You are a good-natured young man, Dorenghi ; you pity me. But do not imagine that I am always blind to the truth about myself. To-morrow doubtless I shall have forgotten these words and perform again. What is one to do ? "

The conductor looked down at his knees, not daring to breathe. Cavaliere Giordano shrugged his shoulders several times ; then he seized his glass. When it was empty, he drew himself up and laughed loudly.

"I am talking nonsense. You will have seen that, maestro, and, I hope, have forgotten it. As you yourself know, one has evenings of depression, and I had them already thirty years ago. What does that prove ? And even if for a long time one feels in no mood for singing, one is still a man. Certain women's glances tell me that even now I might be dangerous to one younger than myself. You open your eyes, maestro, and you have reason to."

"What impudence !" shouted the chemist with a

mighty thump between the glasses. "That peasant clown dares to kiss Signorina Italia on the neck!"

"What's that about peasant clown!" bawled Galileo Belotti, waddling towards him. "To be sure, we are neither coxcombs nor windbags, but we have fists!"

His rustic friends applauded him.

"We shall see!" shouted the chemist, and he stumped on his wooden leg towards the enemy's battle-line. . . .

Cavaliere Giordano tittered.

"You must take care, maestro. Your little Rina—I have met her several times these last days, and nothing is settled—but she confided to me that you were neglecting her, and of course I set to work to console her. The child is timid, but she seems to be forming an attachment for me; and if you, Dorelenghi——"

A crash—several chairs were overturned, and Galileo Belotti, laid low by the chemist, was rolling in the dust. The farmers made for the old soldier. He bellowed furiously and struck out in all directions, for one of them was lifting Italia, who was screaming, on to his cart! Baron Torroni, flushed purple with wine, intervened: she belonged to him; he was a gentleman.

"A gentleman, indeed!" roared Galileo Belotti from between the legs of the combatants.

"Can't you see? It's the Conte Tancredi and poor Toniotta!" panted the lawyer amid the din. All the citizens were waving their arms and cheering on the chemist. Mama Paradisi shrieked and fled, accompanied by her daughters; the municipal secretary conveyed his new coat to a place of safety; the late strollers drew back in a wide circle, while the squabbling farmers availed themselves of the opportunity to disappear without paying; suddenly, with firm stride and one hand in his trouser pocket, Gaddi, the baritone, came up, hit the nobleman and the peasant

in the chest, so that they fell backwards into the cart, and started to whip the horse. Then, without looking round, he led Italia, who had covered her face with her hands and was crying, away down Lucia's alley.

"Take no notice of them!" said the Cavaliere, nudging the conductor. "Our business is more important. The child would certainly love me, if you, Dorlenghi——" The old man murmured something under his breath, and his parchment cheeks flushed—a round, crimson flush, like a patch of fresh rouge.

"—if you would say to her that she is free, that she can indulge her inclination for myself without fear, poor little thing."

He peered down anxiously at the young man, who silently swallowed in his throat without raising his half-shut eyes. Suddenly the conductor stood up, pressed the singer's hand without looking at him and moved swiftly away.

"What an ugly episode," said lawyer Belotti; "we will take care not to let *La Campana del Popolo* hear about it. Such things—let us face the fact!—may occur in any town. Ill-bred people are to be found everywhere, but it is very painful when one's own family——"

"I have had such a good laugh," said Flora Garlinda; "it was so amusing."

"What? But they forgot the respect due to your sex!"

She curled her lip. "I like to see that. I myself do not claim respect because I am a woman, and I hate women."

"But it was dangerous! Those peasants carry knives!"

"Why didn't they draw them? How amusing it would have been! What's the use of all these people! What can they do? If only they had stabbed one

another, that would have been the best thing they have ever done."

The faces of the lawyer, the tobacconist and Signor Giocondi all expressed horrified disapproval. With one accord they all drew themselves up, seized their glasses and clinking them on the table shouted lustily :

"Your health !"

While they were drinking, the arc lamp went out ; the splashing of the fountain sounded uncannily distinct—and suddenly, as though born of the darkness, there appeared on the empty Square a tiny old man. With a tremulous bow, he took off his hat first to Cavaliere Giordano and next to Flora Garlinda. Then, with a tripping, uncertain tread he approached ; every wrinkle of his diminutive face was creased in a smile and his lack-lustre eyes had a faintly roguish expression. As he reached the table, he laid his hand on his heart and, without producing a sound, opened his wide dark mouth, which seemed to swallow up his face. The lawyer noticed that the prima donna started back, and he turned round.

"Oh ! That's Brabrà. Don't be alarmed. He is a harmless lunatic who has lived for the last thirty years on the bounty of Signor Nardini, of Villascura. We have never found out how he came here. Tell the company your name, Brabrà ! For you should know that that is the only sound he ever makes. Say Brabrà !"

Instead, from the outstretched neck, with the long, flabby tendons, there came a thin, falsetto note—it was as if a child were trying to sing in a moment of ecstasy.

"What's the matter with him ?" said the lawyer. "He has never done this before. What does he want ?"

"I too——" said a faint voice, and the old man kept

touching his breast and his neck with his black, skinny fingers. "I too——"

Polli suggested :

"He was at the theatre. It seems to have upset him."

"Ah!" cried the lawyer, and remembering how the crazy old man had diverted the applause of the crowd from himself and, as though in mockery of him, had bowed to the audience, he said sternly :

"What were you doing in the theatre, Brabrà?"

"Theatre!"—and the old man started. Then, with his fingers to his neck: "I too . . . theatre . . ."

Cavaliere Giordano explained :

"He means, poor devil, that he was once on the stage. What was your name then, my friend?" he asked in a tone of kindly superiority. The old man dropped his lids, made a groping movement with his upraised hand, and all his wrinkles, the folds of skin that hid his mouth and the whole of his withered little face were transfixed with silent anguish. All at once the face relaxed, began to work, his eyes emitted a faint gleam, and the mouth opened to say :

"Monterevali."

Cavaliere Giordano leant back.

"Monterevali—it is a long time since I heard that name. Monterevali," he explained to the lawyer, "was past his best days when I began my career, but he was said to have been magnificent in his time. He has been dead for more than thirty years."

"Monterevali," repeated the little old man, pointing to his breast with a trembling finger.

"What fancies these lunatics have!" remarked the lawyer. Signor Giocondi said :

"He is in good form. Bravo, Brabrà!"

The black, toothless mouth was once more open. Cavaliere Giordano put his hand to his ear.

"He is singing something—yes, a melody which—I

fancy—I have heard. What opera is it? What—opera——”

Suddenly they heard Flora Garlinda burst out laughing. They all turned round. She was lying with her arms on the table and from her lips came piercing screams. Her slim figure shook, and the veins stood out on her pale face. They tried vainly to loosen her fingers from the edge of the table, but the forlorn, unutterable anguish in her eyes terrified them ; and then she laughed. . . . As the lawyer was mopping his brow, Chiaralunzi, the tailor appeared in Lucia’s alley.

“The Signorina has not come home,” he said. “Where is Signorina Flora Gar——”

Then he halted, the colour ebbed from his face, and his great hands trembled.

“I did not recognise her voice,” he said. “Is it possible?”

No sooner had he touched her hands than they relaxed. She let him lift her up and he carried her away, repeating as he did so :

“The Signorina will pardon me for taking the liberty.”

Polli, Giocondi and the lawyer exchanged glances.

“The devil ! One never knows where one is with these artists. They seem to be in the best of spirits, and then suddenly they behave like that. . . . Perhaps it will be better not to mention it? Who knows what gossip will be spread about those who were present. . . . Let’s hope that she hasn’t roused anybody. . . . This much is certain : the Invisible One has had a good evening. . . . Friend Acquistapace has been with his wife some time ; he will have got over his worst hour. . . . Good night, Cavaliere. You are going to stay here ? It is one o’clock. Ah ! If only we could sleep on in the morning like these artists.”

The lawyer turned round once more ; he planted

himself opposite the little old man, who was now bowing and smiling alone in the middle of the Square, and said to him gently but firmly :

"Next time, Brabrà, you had better find some form of madness which does not get so much on people's nerves. Even madness, Brabrà, can be regulated and organised. This evening you added a revolting epilogue to a beautiful civic festival. But bear in mind, Brabrà, that your madness does not give you the right to be a bad citizen."

The old man went on making his bows, as though nothing had happened, and finally the lawyer lost his patience, took him by the collar and bundled him too into the poultry-woman's alley.

Achilles came out of his door in order to bid good night to Cavaliere Giordano, who was still seated at the deserted table, and to apologise for closing his Café. The Square was dark and empty. In its blackest corner, on one of the windows of Mancafede's house, a half-open shutter moved, trembled slightly and began to close. But from the dark courtyard of the Town Hall came a footstep—and the shutter remained open.

Nello Gennari, with bowed head, halted under the gateway ; then a white, fluttering figure whispered :

"You are to go back to the theatre at once and——"

It was all he heard. A little nun turned round and once more ran past quite close to him.

"—and sing. There will be a listener."

"The abbess?" he asked, making a movement towards her. But she was already speeding up the steep alley. He ran after her with arms uplifted. It seemed to him that his feet sank into the ground and that yet he was mounting heavenwards ! He stumbled over the goats in his path without noticing them. His teeth chattered and he thought confusedly : "Alba has

come. She is waiting for me. Shall I have to die if I sing : ' This costly night ' ? Perchance this costly night will cost my life. The abbess decides now. However you decide, Alba, I am thine ! "

As he leapt over the last steps, it seemed to him that he was flying. He surveyed the broad terrace in front of the palace ; the nun had disappeared. " Was I dreaming ? How should Alba come here at such an hour ; what does she know of me ? Some one is mocking me. " Then he shut his eyes and rushed inside.

The corridors were not quite dark, and two candles in the wings sent a faint beam along the front of the stage between the shadowy immensities of the hall and the stage. Nello Gennari, his hands pressed to his temples, took two headlong strides on to the stage and shook himself violently. The notes froze on his lips ; his breath came in gasps. He pulled himself together and he sang :

" Let us enjoy the night ; perchance the cost of it is life, this costly night ! "

Slackening his stride, he reached the beam of light in front of the stage and, turning up the palms of his hands like one prepared for death, he raised his eyes. The darkness above was impenetrable. Between two slender columns he could distinguish that third box on the right, blacker than all—black as night and full of mystery, of horror and of rapture.

With head bent back he repeated : " The costly night " ; and as he sustained the last note, he felt a hand at his throat. It was strangling him in its soft, firm grasp. " The abbess, " he thought, closing his eyes. " It is she, I am dying. . . . And am I never to see you, Alba ? " But, as he opened his lids, two little white hands appeared in the darkness above and clapped soundlessly. " This is happiness ; now I know that it is my destiny ! "—and Nello sank on his knees.

Still kneeling he sang: "See, beloved, see our flower-decked house, bidding us blossom!"—and he felt the notes well up from his breast like an inexhaustible tide of happiness. He bent his ear, waiting for his partner to take up the melody. "Her voice! Her voice!" Then flowers fell on his hands. The next moment he heard a door close. He leapt up, rushed out and reached the staircase in time to block her path. Light steps from above ran down a few steps, then back again and hurried away. He followed. The fold of a skirt fluttered round a corner. Framed in the door of a room he recognized the dark, fleeing figure. At the back, where a long gallery melted into the darkness, a white, trembling hand made an imploring gesture. Through the lofty window of a hall, a little star shed its faint, distressful light from between two pursuing clouds upon a derelict throne, battered pictures and a white profile that fled away with its mouth opened in a voiceless scream. Tears streamed from the eyes of the pursuer; blinded with tears he did not see the figure just before him; it panted, stumbled and threw open a window. He stood there; then slowly he raised his clasped hands. His eyes rested on the shadow beneath her brows. They faced each other, silent and motionless. Her arms were stretched above the railing of the window, which was opened to the ground. The outline of her head was lost in the darkness. From the cliff behind her came the roar of a waterfall.

The star glided once more from beneath a heavy cloud, and Alba said:

"You have been crying."

"Because I had to cause you pain," said Nello. "But if I had not found my way to you now, all would have been ended. Do you know what that means?"

"I know everything."

"Alba!"

Immediately he recoiled, for her neck was stretched far into the night air, and she cried :

“ Do not touch me ! ”

An awful silence ; and then, at first imperceptibly, she sank forwards—into his arms.

IV

it struck four.

"We must go," said Alba. "In two hours it will be impossible for us to cross the Square unobserved."

"In two hours!" said Nello. "Stay, stay! You have kept me waiting so long."

And at the next stroke of the bell, as she cried in alarm:

"Five o'clock! Oh, Nello, I am lost."

"Let me leap into the abyss, and you will be saved!"

He was already leaning out; she clung to him.

"Oh Nello! You do not love me!"

She closed her eyes. When she opened them:

"I am ready. We will cross the Square and show ourselves."

"Alba! Forgive me. Why not stay here until night? We have been so happy! In the night I will carry you away myself, I promise you."

"Impossible. I should be missed. Now we must make our way through the convent and down the mountain to Villascura. Come, your hand, my beloved!"

At the gate of the convent:

"At half-past five one of the sisters will open it. Will it be Amica? Amica is our gardener's daughter. She was my servant at home and is now servant here."

Alba looked at the convent gate and lowered her eyes.

"At midnight, when they were all praying in the church, Amica slipped away in order to tell you that I was awaiting you. Will Amica be gate-keeper to-day?"

She was. They followed her, cautiously pressing each other's hands :

"Are we not too happy? What a great calamity it would have to be that could end our happiness."

"Quickly through the garden!" whispered Alba. "If any one should see a man here—and with me! . . . Thank God, the avenue protects us. . . . Now downhill. Oh don't be afraid for me! It looks as steep as a wall, but I know where the steps are and perhaps I alone. This is a disused path. The steps are broken. Take care! Here they are interrupted by a ravine, but I shall find them again. Your hand, my beloved!"

"Alba, there is blood on your hand. I can hardly see it in this faint light, but my lips can taste it. . . . Here is a hollow in the rocks. Will you not rest? Your mouth, my beloved!"

"We must go on. Shall I find the house open? Will you escape? . . . In a moment we shall have reached the terrace. The door on the terrace is open. Shall it be now then?"

"It shall be now! Once more, before we part, on your eyes, Alba!"

"No, I can't bear it. We are at the bottom now. Those bushes hide a projection of the cliff; behind it is a bench."

On his breast :

"How often, Nello, when I was a child, did I hide myself here from the others, from my playmates, who wanted to fetch me. I felt myself different from them. When later they spoke of marriage, I thought: 'My husband will be greater than any of yours'. . . . Now I belong to you, and that seems to me even more strange and sweet and terrible than if I belonged to Christ."

"You make me uneasy, Alba. For I alas! am like the rest. There are so many of us in Verona who learn

singing and tour about the country. I am poor. I have been glad to earn a wretched pittance by singing for four months in the year. The rest of the time I have gazed at the sky and let life slip past. But what has happened to me since I have loved you ! ”

She released herself from his embrace, drew herself up and looked straight in front of her. Her pale profile, with the delicate, finely-chiselled nose, the chin in shadow, the sombre gleam of the eye, seemed to him like a polished dagger.

“ Will you always love me ? ” she asked, gazing at him. He pressed his eyelids together, touched his heart as though it pained him, and shook his head vigorously.

“ Always.”

“ Tell me what women you have loved before me ! ”

“ None ! None ! I swear to you. I know of no other woman ; I shall not know of any. Alba, how I love you ! ”

“ Nello, how I suffer ! ”

“ You too ? ”

“ And how happy we are ! ”

They sat turned to one another, their knees intertwined, their arms stretched in an embrace, and, panting softly, they breathed into each other's mouths from tense, anguished faces.

“ Pardon me ! ” came a faint voice, and then louder and louder :

“ Pardon me ! ”

With a sigh they dropped their arms. On the terrace below, Nonoggi, the barber was hopping about ; grimacing fantastically, he pressed two fingers to his heart, his lips and again to his heart.

“ As I have just been trimming Signor Nardini's beard, I merely wanted to warn the lady and gentleman, because danger is threatening. My intentions are

entirely honourable and no one can hold his tongue as I can. But lawyer Belotti will be here in a moment, and you are no doubt aware that he is the most mischievous scandal-monger in the town. . . . Not that way ! Go along the house, by the waterfall. You will be grateful for my advice—and if I can be of any further service to you, I have scents, fans, false hair . . .”

They climbed a little way, whispering encouragement to one another, in order to find the way down to the darkest wing of the house, where the waterfall rushed past. They ran downhill ; suddenly the mountain bent inwards ; stones rolled down into the ravine ; the ground crumbled beneath their feet. They did not dare to move. They felt the spray of the falling water. Then a whisper came from somewhere beneath them :

“Beware ! We are not alone.”

Lawyer Belotti was bowing to them from below. He put up his hands to his mouth.

“You can rely on me, as you are well aware ; but, as ill luck would have it, Nonoggi, the barber is not far off, and he is the most malicious gossip in the town. Make your escape !”

As they looked down without moving :

“What ? You surely don’t mistrust me ? I have come for my eggs as usual and in proof of it I may tell you that they are a penny dearer to-day.”

With these words he began to unwind a long string bag which he had been holding behind him.

Suddenly the ground cracked and gave way beneath their feet. The bush in front of them slid down beneath the weight of stones and earth.

“Hold on to that pine !” cried the lawyer. But they did not reach out for support ; they only clung fast to one another, and with her arm round his shoulders they fell headlong.

Nello opened his eyes and felt for Alba. She slipped

down away from him ; then he stood up and they both looked round. Above the waterfall some workmen were standing by the power-station and bending themselves double with laughter. Below, lawyer Belotti, with legs wide apart and head thrown back, was smiling complacently. Nonoggi, the barber was running away with his hand pressed to his mouth. Alba and Nello descended the path—and at every step they looked earnestly at one another.

‘Signor Nardini is coming,’ whispered the lawyer—and they fled along the house across the terrace to the further end of the garden and the darkness of the cypress avenue. Upon a shady bench they fell upon each other’s breast.

“Did not a clock strike a long time ago—many times?” asked Alba. “I heard it, but it seemed unreal and unimportant. Now I must go.”

“... Oh heavens ! It is past our dinner hour. My grandfather will be looking for me. What shall I do? ... My beloved, step into the niche of that fountain in the side of the cliff. The boy and girl on the edge of its basin are only spouting a thin stream of water into each other’s faces ; you will not get wet if you stand behind those high plants in the niche.”

“I know it. How often have I stood in there when steps came through the garden. But never, oh Alba, were they yours !”

“I stood behind the terrace-door and watched you. I saw you kiss my footsteps, my beautiful one !”

She stopped and framed his face in her hands.

“Alba, your hair ! When I first saw it, it gleamed red as copper. Now it is quite black.”

“It was never like copper. Do you wish it were more beautiful ?”

“You are a witch. I am afraid of you.”

Then they noticed that they were standing quite near the house. She tore herself away, and he fled into the shadow.

Scarcely had he reached his hiding-place when she turned back. He rushed towards her. She stood still, smiling joyously, and, as he came nearer, she bent her knees slightly and then drew herself up again, as though awaiting the approach and fall of a great wave.

"My grandfather left immediately after dinner. We are alone and free. Do you understand? Do you understand?"

"Oh! So we can seat ourselves on the bench amid the flowers."

"The hyacinths smell so sweet; it makes one want to die," said Alba.

"I no longer need to hide myself behind you," he cried to the two figures on the fountain. "You may go!"

He threw a stone into the boy's mouth. The spout of water broke off. A scream.

"He looked round at me! She screamed! Oh, Nello! What are you doing? Some misfortune will befall us."

"It was you who screamed, Alba"—and he pressed her terrified eyes to his breast. Her white hand reached up towards his head; he pressed his mouth to her shoulder, and as he drank in the pungent, intoxicating scent of her moist, half-distracted body, he was terrified, because he had been able to jest.

She began to speak.

"When I used to come out of the church in the evening, and saw a light in one of the windows of our dark house, I thought: how long will my grandfather continue to light that lamp? And then mine will burn up there, in the house on the mountain-top. It seemed like a friend, and I nodded to it. But now—you look

up for I cannot—doesn't it look terrible? Doesn't it want to kill me?"

The bulging grey mass of the convent crouched on the summit like a bird of prey lying in wait for its victim, its claws dug into the cliff, the roof like a curved beak and two windows like evil, blinking eyes.

"It will only have my dead body. Alive I have only you. What will become of me if you forsake me? Never yet have I known what loneliness means, but now I begin to guess."

As she trembled with anguish, he clasped her more tightly in his arms.

"Never, never will I forsake you!"

She turned her face upwards and shook her head slowly and emphatically, while great tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

"It is impossible that you can love me as I love you."

She freed herself and, with her hands covering her eyes, took two tottering steps into the shadow.

"We should die now," she said.

"Here are flowers," he said, "a soft carpet. How if we slept on it to-night?"

"You wish to? You do love me then?"

"We would do what Tonietta and her Piero never did," he added, smiling proudly.

"Who are they?"

"Famous lovers. Shall we too one day be famous?"

"I want to hear you sing; I want to hear you sing once more!" and she clung trembling to his shoulder.

"Nello, I would give my life for your voice. Mine is weak; I cannot say how I love. You can!"

"The rehearsal!" cried Nello. "The maestro was not satisfied with me, and this evening I am to sing to you! For you will come; say that you will come!"

"Since you wish it. . . . I will climb back over the mountain. From the convent a passage leads to the

castle ; Amica will accompany me. Old Corvi secretly sold me the key of the box. Shall I venture through the door, and behold the lights, the crowd, the splendour of the hall encircling you, my beloved, like a halo ? ”

“ I feel that I shall sing well for the first time. Come with me, now at once ! As long as I have you, I have the strength of a hero.”

“ I will go with you ! The street is empty ; it is hot ; and even if people came, what do they know ? What harm can they do us ? ”

“ What harm can they do us ? ”

A mountain ash flamed against the blue sky. Alba ran on ; then she gave a loud scream ; a large black snake lay right across the dusty path. Nello picked up a stone, and, as Alba tried to hold him back :

“ Let go ! What can happen to me, to me whom you love ? ”

He went on, and his hand was already raised to strike a swift blow at the snake, when he saw that there was blood on its neck. It was dead ! At the same moment he hurled the stone. Alba ran up.

“ You terrified me, wicked one. How brave you are ! A hero ! My beloved is a hero ! ”

She kissed his hand. He drew it away from her and groaned.

“ What’s the matter, my Nello ? ”

“ This creature is more repulsive dead than alive. Don’t step over it, Alba. Turn back ; I see people coming. Will you come to the theatre ? Oh, come ! I shall be able to sing this evening, and perhaps that is all I can do ? ”

• He walked on alone, his head sunk between his lifted shoulders.

“ I deceived Alba ! . . . But when I was about to throw the stone, I thought the snake was alive. Did I

then deceive Alba ? I am no coward. How she loves me ! How we love each other ! To die would be nothing. . . .”

The Square was still deserted ; in front of the Café, Gaddi was reading a newspaper.

“ You too have come for nothing ! ” he shouted, as the tenor approached. “ The rehearsal is cancelled. The maestro prefers to hold a rehearsal of his mass. Naturally Maestro Viviani is of less importance to him than Maestro Dorelengi.”

“ Oh, Virginio ! ”—and Nello pressed his friend’s hand as though he would crush it : “ How we love each other ! ”

“ Settled ? My congratulations. As she is a rich girl, you will have no objection to marrying her. By the way, I have just been reading of the bankruptcy of the Valle-Bonisardi dramatic company, with whom I very nearly concluded a contract.”

Nello’s laugh rang like gold.

“ You don’t know : I shall sing to her, to her alone. Oh ! You don’t know ! I killed a snake which was about to bite her.”

He smoothed back his hair, his breast swelled, and a radiant smile overspread his features. Gaddi surveyed him.

“ I don’t deny that you look like a god. But a man can’t kill snakes every day ; and even singing isn’t really an occupation for a man’s whole life.”

The happy smile suddenly faded from the tenor’s lips, and his face was white and exhausted as he dropped his head on to his breast.

“ Is anything for one’s whole life ? ” he murmured. “ If I turned and went back, now at once, now at once : could I be sure of finding her again, my beloved, whom I have only just left ? Was it all only a vivid dream ? ”

And, as Gaddi laughed his sonorous laugh :

"I am mad, am I ? Tell me that I am simply mad ! " —and he too laughed. At the window of her house Mama Paradisi panted : " See, beloved, see our flower-decked house " ; the shrill voice of one of her daughters screamed Tonietta's prayer across the Square, while the other hummed : " I have a right to your women, I am your lord."

"And my wife !" said Nonoggi, the barber, as he tripped past. " She has been singing, ever since she woke : ' What a release to know no more of love ', and yet I remember all too well that she knew something of it only last night."

Nello shook himself. Polli and Giocondi came in, and thumped violently on the table.

"A vermouth, friend Achilles, the day is going to be hot. Do you see how fierce the competition is growing ? "

The landlord of the *Café Progresso* shrugged his heavy, round shoulders.

"Competition do you call it ? Have you, who have already lived fifty years in this town, ever realised that behind that projection of Mancafede's house there skulks another Café—the *Café Sant' Agapito* ? I sent my Alfo over there only to-day to find out what it was called."

And he spat. Despite his contempt he was breathing faster than usual and he had to support his paunch on the back of a chair.

"The *Café Sant' Agapito* !" cried Nello in a shrill voice. " Do they serve you with holy water there ? "

"How witty you are, Signor !" said Achilles with a titter. Nonoggi drew a tress of false hair out of his breast-pocket.

"You are a lucky man, Signor Nello Gennari. I have in stock everything you desire. Even fans."

Nello laughed without listening.

"That doesn't alter the fact," declared Polli, "that already at this moment there are crowds of them sitting over there, and that Giovaccone is now beginning to set out his tables on the Square. It seems incredible, but all the middle classes are in an uproar—on account of that empty box !"

"And it seems that they are leaguering themselves with Don Taddeo," added Signor Giocondi.

"For you !" screamed Nonoggi. "All for Signor Nello ! And if you will honour my shop, with a visit——"

He tugged at the young man's arm.

"—you will find an extremely elegant dressing-case—just the thing for a man in your position."

Nello waved him aside. He looked round ecstatically. How amusing it all was !

"Ah ! this Don Taddeo !" said Polli, crossing his arms. "It seems that he wants a fight to a finish."

"A demagogue," cried Giocondi, "in his sermon this morning he tried to stir up the people against their betters ! You were not in church, Signor Gaddi ? I too will never set my foot in the place again. Has he any right to tell the people in his sermon that they ought to demolish the theatre ?"

The barber's face was twisted in a violent grimace.

"What do I hear, Signor Nello ? You refuse to buy anything ? But do you know what that means ? It means that you are going to ruin me ! For did I not get in all these expensive goods for your sake alone and at your express wish ?"

"Demolish the theatre !" cried Nello, throwing the tail of false hair into the air.

"We will first demolish the *Café Sant' Agapito*," said Achilles. "It has long been ripe for it."

"I am ruined !" screeched Nonoggi, running after

a boy, who had made off with the tail of false hair.

Polli nodded gravely.

"In one respect the priest is quite right ; good morals are visibly disappearing from our midst. We don't know whom he had in mind when he cursed the Babylonian woman so repeatedly. . . ."

"No doubt he meant the big yellow-haired chorus-girl," suggested Giocondi, digging Polli in the stomach.

"I must admit," declared Achilles, "that when I opened my shutters this morning, I found a pair of lovers on the sofa ; they had spent the night there."

"And when I came home," said the tobacconist, "I found a pair on my steps."

Giocondi threw up his hands.

"Don't mention it ! Why, in my street—I can assure you, the ground was thick with them ; to say nothing of the courtyard of the Town Hall, where it's so dark."

They burst out laughing ; they rocked till they had to prop their hands on their knees.

At this moment little old Brabrà came past ; he was smiling into vacancy and from his lips came a quavering trill.

"Brabrà !" cried Signor Giocondi. "He too was abroad last night, and I warrant he saw a lot of things. He's laughing to himself about it."

The barber was dancing about in front of Nello ; the corners of his mouth drooped as though he were on the point of tears.

"You will understand me, sir. I have a family to feed, and if you insist on ruining me, there is nothing left for me to do but to tell everybody what I know . . ."

He broke off, and peered up into the young man's eyes. The women looked out of the windows : Nello stood with his hands on his hips, and his laugh rang out like a song. The others laughed too.

"And the lawyer!" burst out Polli. "We quite understand why he is not yet on the Square on such an important day. He is hard at work in his study. As the day is warm, he is sitting at his writing-table in his under-pants and receiving the little chorus-girls who want advance-payments . . ."

"Oh! You filthy little rascals, what's that you're singing?" roared Achilles.

"It may perhaps cost us our lives, this costly night," sang the troop of boys, but with other words, as they marched quickly past. Nello Gennari laughed as he followed them round the Square. In front of Mancafede's house he came to a sudden halt: the shutter of one of the windows on the first storey had moved. Nello's laugh died in his throat, and he stood there, his face drawn and tired, blinking nervously.

"The Invisible One! I had forgotten her, but her eyes have been upon me all the time. She recognises my footsteps and she knows where I am going. Where? Where?"—and he threw a passionate glance at the dark space between the shutters. Immediately after, with his neck turned away and his hand outspread:

"No! Not a word! Better die, if need be, without knowing. . . . But die?"

He crossed his arms, bent his face down to them and shuddered violently.

"No longer to feel Alba's hands round my head, never again to breathe in the scent of her moist skin; never again to feel the white-hot glow of her smile. . . . I should have died yesterday. Yesterday I could have borne it. . . . What anguish, what dangers! To think that I could laugh! Nonoggi threatened me; I did not understand, I felt as though he were playing his pranks somewhere far below, on the ground. Now I see the horrid cunning in his bloodshot eyes. I must go to him and buy all that he wants me to buy!"

But, as he turned round, he saw the merchant standing at the door of his shop and smiling significantly. He knew everything—since his daughter knew everything ! Now was the time to placate destiny ! To purchase a respite !

“ Had you not, sir——” stammered Nello. “ Had you not——”

Mancafede rubbed his hands.

“ I have a lot of red flannel, just the thing for dramatic artists. I also have material for autumn suits. But don't hurry over your choice, Signor Nello Gennari. If I closed my shop on Sunday, I would open it again for a client like yourself.”

“ I like this costume, but it is probably too expensive for me.”

The merchant interrupted him :

“ I will send it to you—and I shall be careful not to worry a client of your importance, sir, regarding payment. I know too well that I shall lose nothing by your custom. Perhaps this costume too ; it would suit you to perfection ; or this one, which would win the hearts of all the women ? ”

“ As you like,” murmured Nello.

“ The two of them, then. Very good, sir. Your wishes shall be attended to. And in return you shall have the red flannel at a special price ”—and the merchant's grey cheeks seemed suddenly to glow with the reflection of his red flannel.

“ What price ? ” asked Nello in a tone of resignation. Mancafede did not reply ; he was bowing from his doorway. He apologised, and his profile, that was like the profile of an old hare, wore a gentle, crafty smile.

“ A lady customer went past, sir—merely a customer.”

And while Nello stood bent over the showy check materials, the curtain of the cathedral door closed behind Alba.

The church was quite empty. Alba pushed back her veil from her eyes, looked round, panting lightly, as though in search of pursuers, and sank on her knees in the nearest pew. She dropped her forehead on her hands. As the cold air sent a delicious shudder down her hot neck, she drew her shawl over it. Her shoulders trembled and the weight of her brow seemed to crush her aching hands more and more cruelly against the hard wood. With a start she drew herself up, looked at her hands, looked at the traces of the tears which had flowed from her eyes on to the pew, and shook her head slowly. . . . There was a rustle in the porch. Alba fled into the shadow of a confession box.

She glided along, stopped behind the nun who was kneeling before the chapel of Saint Agapitus and groped softly for the hem of her robe ; suddenly the hand ceased groping and was pressed anxiously to her throat whence a sob was struggling to escape. Her hot eyes still fixed on the figure kneeling in tranquil devotion, Alba stole back into the shadow.

The nun had gone. A vast silence—but the long yellow curtain of the last window yonder at the back began to move ; something black rustled down ; and Don Taddeo appeared at the door by the side of the high altar. He reeled as he walked and on his bent shoulders there were traces of whitewash ; his feverish glance strayed through the nave. When Alba suddenly came forward, he started so violently that the folds of his loose cassock swayed to and fro. As she made an imploring gesture towards the confession box, he recoiled swiftly and his face contracted as though in agony. She put the tips of her fingers together, raised them to her lips and walked on, her eyes opened very wide, gazing straight in front of her. On the threshold she hesitated and turned round towards him ; their glances met and their eyelids drooped imperceptibly.

The priest closed his and passed his left hand across them ; with his right hand he made a trembling gesture and then, with long, fluttering strides he reached the sacristy.

Alba stood breathless on the threshold. . . . At length she dropped her shoulders with an effort, lowered the veil over her eyes, and raised the curtain of the door which had smothered the hubbub of the Square.

A woman with a lace shawl over her hair—a stranger—was just raising her hand towards the curtain and Alba handed it to her. Italia bent her head and gazed after the veiled, hurrying figure with large, inquisitive, cow-like eyes.

“ You will never get through here, Signorina,” said Felicetta, the servant-girl ; for a dense crowd of women extended from the cathedral to the other side of the Square ; they were holding up their children and shouting to one another.

“ Although I no longer work for the gentry but for Crepalini, the baker, who is waging war against the gentry, I will give you a piece of advice, Signorina, for you are kind to the poor : Go down one of the streets leading from the Corso and then up again by the Town Hall. In that way you will avoid unpleasantness. For the Square is full of men who are wanting to fight each other. Do you see my master, the baker, sitting in front of Giovaccone’s Café ? He has a great many followers, and I know what it means when his face is as red as that. Woe betide lawyer Belotti ! He won’t be laying down the law at Achilles’ Café much longer.”

Nonoggi’s wife and the wife of the shoemaker, Malagodi, shrieked simultaneously :

“ Look at that godless crowd ! They are the enemies of Don Taddeo, and they want to take away the bucket from him.”

The baker's voice bellowed above the din :

" Ah ! So the gentry don't want to sell us the keys of the boxes ; in that case they won't get another glimpse of the key to the bucket."

And he began to repeat :

" Ah ! So the gentry don't want——"

Lawyer Belotti gasped a retort, which no one could hear, but his companions were seen to laugh scornfully.

" Pappappapp," shouted his brother, Galileo at the baker's table.

Suddenly the wife of Acquistapace, the chemist, shook her fist out of the window and began to scream :

" Oh ! Liar ! Oh ! Traitor ! He says that Don Taddeo has sold the bucket to an American."

The company at the *Café Sant' Agapito* were on their feet in a moment, their fists waving in the air. The women in front of the cathedral began to shout indignantly.

" The lawyer is right," bawled Bonometti, who was standing in front of the Town Hall, and he began to prod Dotti, the little old official, who was standing in the crowd.

" Shout too ! The lawyer is right about the bucket. He is unmasking the intrigues of the sacristy. The lawyer is a great man !"

The officials began to shriek : " Long live the lawyer !"

Stout old Corvi added :

" The lawyer is a great man, for he is going to give me the appointment at the Public Weighing Office."

" Didn't he build our laundry ?" Fania and Nana the servant-girls demanded of the shoe-maker's wife.

" Long live the lawyer !"

And from amid the crowd of women the little chorus-girls cried : " And he gives us as many advances as we want ! Long live the lawyer !"

The lawyer made a sign with his hat towards his supporters, and said to those around him :

"Good-hearted creatures ! When we find such sentiments among the people, there is no longer any question who is right : lawlessness in league with reaction, or order which is one with liberty."

"Always big words," murmured the municipal secretary. "Who knows which is the side of liberty ? Liberty is not the same thing as licence."

"Is that meant to be personal, Camuzzi ?" asked the lawyer. "Then let me tell you that I am not ashamed of a life that is free from hypocrisy. I know myself to be linked with a glorious tradition. It is plain that you are ignorant, sir, from what mothers we are sprung. Upon the site of our town, sir, a temple of Venus once stood."

"Now it is demolished"—and the secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"Rejoice in the fact with your Don Taddeo, that demagogue in priest's clothing. Did he not in his sermon this morning tell the people that, if those in power gave way to sensual lust, they should destroy them ? I know well whom he meant by those in power——"

The lawyer pointed to his breast.

"—And on this occasion your Don Taddeo shall learn for the first time what power signifies !"

He flourished a newspaper. The tobacconist scratched his head.

"Very good. But in the meantime we are few in numbers—and the middle classes are mustering whole regiments. We must fetch our friends. And I will go and find my Olindo. He may be a good-for-nothing, but he has fists."

The collector of the municipal taxes also declared his intention of going in search of recruits and he made

for the chemist's shop. Old Acquistapace stumped out, brandishing his pestle.

"Romolo!" cried a shrill voice from above.

"There is no longer any Romolo!" he bellowed.

"There is only one of Garibaldi's soldiers, who sees the cause of liberty in danger."

And growing more and more bold :

"Where are the cowards who hide in their shops for fear of their wives? Where is Mancafede?"

Flourishing his pestle, he advanced across the Square towards and through the midst of the hostile force. The latter waved their arms furiously, but not one of them ventured to lay hands on the old soldier; and as Mancafede was pulling down his roller blinds, he felt a hand seize him. Trembling he followed his captor.

"Usurer!" shouted Allebardi, the upholsterer, right under the merchant's nose in a voice like his bombardon. Mancafede turned pale and started back. The people repeated :

"Usurer!" "Thief!"—and Zecchini, the old tavern-hero suddenly flushed purple with rage: "A thief, who buys up all the wine so that no one can pay for it and we are compelled to go thirsty!"

"We don't mean to go thirsty!" bawled his boon-companions.

"And we don't mean to starve," called out a burly wagoner from the Town Hall. "Down with the baker!"

"Down with the baker!" repeated the people; and Crepalini hastily concealed himself among his companions.

"And Serafini's cakes!" yelled Coletto, the confectioner's boy, from behind the wagoner's back. "Do you want to know what he puts in them instead of cinnamon? Crushed bugs! The bug confectioner! The bug confectioner!"

An exclamation of disgust—and above the din a woman's voice wailed :

" Isidoro, my Isidoro ! "

Mama Paradisi was hanging distractedly out of her window.

" Flee, my Isidoro, they will hurt you. Run, run ! "

Mancafede cast a despairing glance towards her ; his captor had already pushed him into the *Café Progresso*.

Signor Giocondi led up Baron Torrioni. The Salvatoris, uncle and nephew, followed him.

" They stole my factory," he said to Salvatori, slapping him on the chest, " but here it is a question of liberty ; that's a different pair of shoes."

The chemist was pursuing Nonoggi, the barber, who was running round the Square like a weasel and grimacing violently. As he passed Giovaccone's *Café*, he crossed himself and screeched :

" Don Taddeo is a saint."

And when he was nearing the tables outside Achilles' *Café* :

" Long live the lawyer ! "

As the chemist was unable to catch him, he brought up instead Malandrini, the innkeeper, and Zampieri, the schoolteacher, who had merely come to see what was going on. Dorenghi, the conductor, turned up of his own accord ; he threw up his arms.

" And, my mass ? Not a single person came to the rehearsal in the cathedral ! "

Zampieri said : " There are days, sir, on which we intellectuals too must forsake our studies and come down to the Square in the service of great ideas."

" Their numbers are growing over there," cried Blandini, the mechanic from the other side. " It's time we too collected our forces."

Immediately Macola and Druso, the barbers, ran

towards the Corso, and Fantapiè, the locksmith, towards the steep alley, and they began to call up to the houses :

“ Come to the Square, all of you ! ”

A number of peasants trooped across from the *Luna* and the *Promessi Sposi*.

“ Come over here ! ” bawled Galileo Belotti, who was standing in the centre by the fountain. “ We are making war against buffoons ! ”

But when handsome Alfo, for no apparent reason, bared his teeth and darted out at him, Galileo very promptly waddled back on his short legs to the stronghold of his partisans. Handsome Alfo, smiling fatuously, brought back as a trophy the farmer’s blue glasses.

The peasants, however, took the side of Saint Agapitus.

As Scarpetta, the locksmith, approached from the Town Gate, intending to join the party of the middle classes, lawyer Belotti blocked his path, and promised him the work at the Town Hall which would otherwise have fallen to Fantapiè ; and Scarpetta stayed where he was. When Chiaralunzi, the tailor, came out of Lucia’s alley, the lawyer tried to capture him with a similar bait ; but the tailor answered :

“ Excuse me, sir ; I have the greatest respect for you, sir, but a man who does not stick up for his class is not good for much.”

And he went across.

Polli came back. He had not secured any one but his son, whom he was pushing along in front of him. They both looked flushed and exhausted. The tobacconist panted :

“ Here is my son, Olindo. He shall fight for liberty. Do you think he would have come of his own accord ? Oh ! my son is a type, for whom liberty is of small consequence. Instead, while his father was labouring in the public interests, he had brought that hussy, that big

yellow-haired chorus-girl into my house, into my own house, and I leave you to imagine what he was up to with her."

He punched Olindo in the ribs.

"When his mother saw it, she fell down in a faint. As for myself, when I see such corruption of our children, I feel inclined to side with the priest."

Signor Salvatori too expressed concern for his nephew. In order that their minds might not be perplexed by any further scruples, the lawyer drew the tobacconist solemnly aside :

"We are friends, are we not, Polli ?"

"As much friendship as you like, but——"

"There is no but. For, let us be frank : we are all subject to human frailties. Your conscience, Polli, will tell you whether your indignation with your son was the indignation of a father or of a rival. In any case, Polli, reflect upon your duty as a citizen !"

Polli only muttered under his breath, and the lawyer surveyed his increased numbers with pride and confidence. Achilles went round with the bottle of vermouth, because courage was needed.

"Hohoho !" they shouted in chorus. From the *Café Sant' Agapito* came an answering shout :

"Huhuhu !"

The people in front of the cathedral and by the Town Hall joined in the shouting, clapped their hands and whistled. The women screamed from all the windows. Then old Acquistapace thundered :

"Is it possible ! They have got Savezzo with them over there !"

"He must have gone there by mistake," suggested Signor Giocondi. Achilles put his hands to his mouth and shouted :

"Do you like the holy water, Signor Savezzo ?"

Knowing himself discovered, Savezzo strode out on

to the Square with arms crossed. For some time he gazed round from beneath his puckered brows, with an expression of gloomy satisfaction.

"What do you want?" shouted the people. Thereupon he began to speak, with much rolling of eyes and stiff, exaggerated gestures:

"In our town economic protection and the dictatorship of one class has been, must be done away with!"

"It is done away with!" shouted the people.

"Oh! my friends——" and Savezzo spread out his arms, as though he were stretched on a cross, "in future you shall be able to enjoy the fruits of talent even if they are not offered by certain families. On the next lists for the municipal elections the names which stand for corruption and exploitation of the people will no longer appear. For those who bear them——"

"The baker!" shouted Bonometti and the wagoner. The people repeated:

"He means the baker!"

"The confectioner!" screamed Coletto. "The bug confectioner!"

"—will recoil in terror before the vastness of your revenge"—and Savezzo paused exhausted.

"Would you like a glass of water?" cried a woman.

"He needs it. He is delivering his lecture on friendship," said lawyer Belotti, smiling contemptuously.

"—your revenge," continued Savezzo, displaying his profile to the people, "which will have wrought fearful havoc in that seat of godlessness, vice and tyranny—the theatre!"

"Huhuhu!" shouted the crowd at the *Café Progresso*.

"What is he talking about?" asked Felicetta, the servant-girl, of her neighbour, who shrugged her shoulders.

"Enough ! We want ' Poor Tonietta '," shouted the waggoner, and he began to hum :

"See, beloved——"

There was a burst of laughter. Savezzo once more clutched his hair, once more thrust out his hand over the people, then shook his clenched fist at the *Café Progresso* and withdrew. The Baron spat after him.

"What a cowardly hypocrite ! He has revealed his true nature."

"He never took me in," declared the lawyer. "I always discerned behind his humility and his sullenness the envy of one who does not belong to the gods."

"The actress ! Don't let her escape !" yelled the wife of Pipistrelli, the verger, from the steps of the cathedral ; and, pursued by the women and screeching like a peacock, Italia ran with short, stilted steps across the Square. Acquistapace, the chemist, stumped towards her, and although a terrible voice from above shouted "Romolo !" he caught her in his arms. The women did not retreat but blockaded the *Café Progresso*. Young Severino Salvatori strolled elegantly towards them and began to lisp personal insults.

"There he is !" cried the wife of Malagodi, the shoemaker. "He made immoral suggestions to our Elena, and she showed him the door."

"Oh ! What a handsome young man"—and one of them made a grab at his eye-glass. Thereupon they all made off, with shrieks of laughter and gestures that were not all quite decent.

"What have I done that I should be killed ?" wailed Italia, seated on the leather-covered bench inside the *Café*, where Signor Giocondi, glancing roguishly towards the company, was loosening her bodice. Mancafede, the merchant, too had taken refuge inside ; he wrung his withered hands.

"Civil war is a terrible thing ; it's bad for business, and, if God so wills, one suffers violence as well."

"Do you think so ?" stammered Cavaliere Giordano from the darkest corner.

Signor Giocondi declared that he had found a bruise on Italia's neck, and called for vinegar. Achilles brought it and said :

"Only to think that one single priest can make so much mischief."

"There are good priests"—and Cavaliere Giordano stretched out an imploring hand. "There are good priests and there are bad priests."

Italia sobbed.

"Don Taddeo is not a bad priest. He does not want people to sin ; there he is right. Oh ! Woe is me !"

"Don't cry," murmured the chemist. He was standing beside her with his hands on his stomach and he was crying himself.

"When I confessed to him the first time," said Italia tearfully, "he was very harsh ; he wanted to know everything, everything, everything."

"Naturally," remarked Achilles. "That is their recreation."

"And he asked such terrible questions that it almost seemed as if he already knew everything. Is he really a saint ?"

"No ; but he was probably hiding under the bed," shouted Baron Torroni with a loud guffaw.

"And then he told me to go to the madonna of Loretto. I shall go ; otherwise I shall have ill-luck. . . . But when I went back to-day——"

"Poor girl, she too is in the clutches of the priests !" sighed the chemist.

"—he refused to listen to me."

Signor Giocondi suggested :

"He is afraid that you are making game of him."

"He was praying in the sacristy, and his eyes were like red-hot coals."

"The artful rogue!" cried Malandrini, the inn-keeper. "He eggs on the middle classes against us, and then pretends to be wholly taken up with the saints in paradise."

"It would be vain to look for him on the Square, the hypocrite!" said the lawyer, who had joined them.

"I went to him once more, and then——" Italia trembled—"he sprang up from his praying-stool like a wild cat. What a fright I had! I ran and he ran after me. He shouted to me to come and confess, but after my first word, he said 'Enough' and gave me absolution. I thought he had made a mistake and began again. But he groaned in a way that boded no good to me, so I hurried away."

She gazed at them all in consternation. The lawyer declared:

"No doubt he is still crouching in his confession box—probably under the seat. Oh! There is no fear of his taking command at the *Café Sant' Agapito*."

The municipal secretary had followed the lawyer.

"Whatever one may think about Don Taddeo," he said, shaking his head, "he is in any case a man of spirit. Surely you don't deny that? He was not afraid of us, not even of you, lawyer, and he was alone; his chaplain is gathering herbs."

"Would to God he were doing the same, sir."

"He does not build laundries, but he upholds the interests of religion."

"And uses it as a cloak for class-hatred."

"Don't we use liberty as a cloak for it?"

"Ah!"—and the lawyer turned round; "at this moment I have no leisure for talking philosophy with you, Signor Camuzzi; the town is waiting for me to act!"

He drove them all out of the Café

"Stay! Where are you off to?"—and he caught hold of Nello Gennari, who was trying to escape through a gap in the crowd; he had caught a glimpse of Alba at the end of the little street opposite the Town Hall.

"Important business," he said feverishly, struggling in the arms of the lawyer.

Alba stood transfixed; from the balcony on the second storey of the Town Hall a glance pierced her which robbed her of the courage to move or even to breathe. "Never have I seen such eyes! Nello!" She called to her beloved; she summoned up all the force of her love; in vain, the hatred up there was stronger than her love; overcome with anguish lest its deadly vapour should overcome and destroy her, she fled back into the street.

"There is no important business," said the lawyer, "save the fight for liberty; and who, my young friend," with a meaning smile, "can be more interested than us two in liberty under the protection of Venus?"

Gaddi, the baritone, approached with his heavy stride.

"You must stay, Nello! We too have our honour, and no one shall with impunity shout in my face that the actors steal the washing."

With his hands in his trouser pockets and his Cæsar-like profile held high, he strode calmly into the Square. Crepalini, the baker, had ventured forth and, with his purple face, nut-cracker jaws, protruding eyes, and scolding voice, was joining in the din. Suddenly he hung suspended in the air, with sprawling limbs. Gaddi flung him over to his party and walked calmly back. Fantapiè, the locksmith, at the head of his band, was about to attack him, but Acquistapace and Baron Torroni brought up their comrades. Achilles followed, brandishing a chair. By the time that he had reached the enemy, he was out of breath, and he set down the

chair and leant his paunch on the back. "Ah ! friend Giovaccone," he shouted, "swine that you are ! You are doing good business, no doubt, for holy water does not cost much !"

Coletto, the confectioner's apprentice, was skipping about behind him, and suddenly he flung his prayer-book at the head of his master, Serafini. Mancafede, the merchant, who was being shoved along by Giocondi and Polli, collapsed on to his knees with a shriek ; he had been hit by the stopper of a bottle.

"Hohoho !"

"Huhuhu !"

"Down with ' Poor Toniaetta ' !"

"Down with the priests !"

"What does your Don Taddeo want ?" shouted Malandrini, the innkeeper. "When he thrashed my boy this morning, he himself was whistling ' Poor Toniaetta '."

"Hold your tongue !" bellowed Allebardi, the upholsterer. "And may your belly turn as putrid as your beefsteaks !"

Fantapiè, the locksmith, fixed his eyes on Scarpetta, the locksmith, and shouted through his hands :

"Base sycophant !"

"Key-eater !" cried Scarpetta, spitting vehemently.

"He has eaten the key of the bucket, and now he is praying to Saint Agapitus that he may not have stomach-ache."

Signor Giocondi heard :

"Swindler ! Bankrupt !"

And he sprang up :

"Oh ! You thieves, you exploiters of the people ! Here I am, Chiaralunzi ; you stole half the cloth for my overcoat !"

"Huhuhu !"

"Hohoho !"

Right at the back, where the ranks of the defenders of the *Caf  Progreso* were widest, Mancasfede, the merchant, was brandishing his yard-measure. His grey wrinkles were flushed. "Let any one dare," he yelled. "Let any one dare !"

Where the ranks were not so wide, Dorelengi, the conductor, was gazing round distractedly ; then a shout came from the other side :

" ' Poor Tonietta ' is not music ! The maestro does not know what music is ! "

" Was that Blandini ? " asked the conductor, rushing to the front, where the chemist, with Gaddi and Torroni on either hand, was brandishing his pestle in the face of the enemy.

" You fleas from the sacristy," thundered Acquistapace, " who do not respect the work of Garibaldi."

" Garibaldi was a hateful character ! He destroyed the Holy Father," screamed Nonoggi's wife from the cathedral, but Fania and Nan , the servant-girls, threatened her with their fists.

" Stand firm, Cimabue ! " yelled Pipistrelli's wife, although their hands were on her throat. For in the midst of the throng the butcher was wrestling with Zampieri, the teacher. " Go for them, Allebardi ! Go for them, you men ! "

Coletto dived under the eldest Chiaralunzi, who was being pinched from behind by young Gaddi. One of the little Nonoggis shouted : " Long live Don Taddeo ! " and took to his heels. Immediately a whole troop of boys swarmed over him, and the stout hostess of the *Promessi Sposi* was swept along with them.

Handsome Alfo flourished Galileo Belotti's blue glasses and Malagodi, the shoemaker, held aloft young Salvatori's monocle, which he had taken from his wife. Zampieri, the teacher shouted once more :

" Any one who attacks the great ideas shall die ! "

At that moment he was forced to kiss the pavement in the embrace of Cimabue, the butcher. Zecchini and Corvi, the two troopers, lunged at one another with their mighty fists, and then, as they met, merely exchanged a friendly little tap on the stomach.

"Good luck to you," they said.

The peasants, not knowing who anybody was, struck out indiscriminately. Galileo Belotti, hustled this way and that by the combatants, blustered incessantly: "Where is the lawyer? Where is the buffoon?"

The lawyer was hurrying up and down in front of the Town Hall and making gestures of encouragement.

"Hullo, Dotti! Hullo, Cicogna! Come along, the good cause needs you. . . . I know you"—and he caught hold of the wagoner by his blouse, "you brought me wood and drank a glass of something in my kitchen. We are friends!"

"Friends!" roared the wagoner, and with one blow of his fist he felled to the ground old Fierabelli, the ropemaker, who had stepped under the archway of the Town Hall for reasons of his own. Bonometti, the barber, struck himself on the chest.

"You are a great man, lawyer. If Cimabue, the butcher, were ten times stronger than he is, the lawyer would still be a great man! . . . Our lives for lawyer Belotti!" he shouted, and he forced his way through the ranks, waving his cap, fatally attracted by the butcher, who lifted him from the ground with one hand. Already Bonometti had lost his cap and his necktie. . . . The lawyer turned away, very pale. He said to Polli in a hoarse voice:

"Glory demands that one should look neither to the right side nor to the left. But believe me, Polli, there are moments when one would rather be standing in rank and file with all the rest."

Polli scratched his head.

“ Meantime it looks as though we should be beaten. It will do my Olindo good, but as for myself——”
And he retreated into the Café.

Ten of the enemy were attacking old Acquistapace and trying to seize his pestle. He retreated before them step by step. As the front ranks were pressed back, they trod on the feet of those behind ; they began to abuse each other ; and, amid cries of frenzied exultation from the women, the champions of liberty were driven back by the hosts of Saint Agapitus. Wrathfully brandishing his chair, Achilles diligently covered the retreat.

“ Now lawyer,” said Signor Giocondi angrily, “ they have torn all my buttons off except this one. Isn’t it time that you lent a hand ? ”

The lawyer cast a swift look round. In the steep alley he perceived his sister, Artemisia, Signora Salvatori and Giocondi’s wife, while behind them Iole Capitani was holding out her clasped hands. The lawyer uttered a groan and prepared to hurl himself alone against the victorious enemy. Then, above the hubbub, his ear caught the sound of soft music—faint quick music—at first only a chirp in the distance, and now already its bold, tuneful jingle was close at hand.

“ We are saved,” cried the lawyer softly ; and then with all the force of his lungs :

“ The victory is ours ! Courage, friends ! ”

The chemist was already brandishing his pestle for a fresh attack ; those next to him pressed forward, and, menaced by an as yet uncomprehended danger, the enemy hesitatingly beat a retreat : while from the street by the Town Hall there advanced at a quick march a column of young men—ten workers from the power station—with mandolines and guitars. The people by the Town Hall made way for them. In front of the

Café *Progresso*, lawyer Belotti advanced to meet them. He took off his hat.

"Gentlemen!"

They stopped playing and stood still. All around was silence.

"Gentlemen, we are fighting here for your interests; for what higher interest could you have—you, the people, the true people—than liberty."

"Buffoon!" roared his brother from the other side. "Don't you see that he is making game of you?"

The women began to scream, and the host of the *Promessi Sposi* shouted:

"But he doesn't want any socialists in the corporation."

"Don't listen to those slanderers!" cried the lawyer in a high-pitched voice, and his uplifted arms trembled.

"I am the friend of the people, I, lawyer Belotti, who arranged for the construction of the power station and the performance of *Povera Tonietta*, which you enjoyed so much; for I know you as you know me; we are friends. You two——"

He stretched out his hands.

"—I saw you do a noble deed, a sublime deed. That poor hunchback whom infamous men had ill-treated: oh, friends, we understand one another in the name of humanity."

The lawyer's eyes were filled with tears. The two young men with large hats and fancy neckties wrung him by the hand. He shook theirs.

"Tell your comrades that I will everywhere champion their cause and that your enemies are mine. Look at that crowd yonder: they want to close the theatre, where you seek your noblest pleasures. Look at them; once they gain the power, they will take away your work and deliver over the town to the priests. Was it for this

the people bled in the cause of liberty ? Down with the priests ! ”

Those behind him repeated :

“ Down with the priests ! ”

The workmen started ; they exchanged glances.

“ Liberty for ever ! ” shouted several in chorus.

A murmur spread through the *Café Sant’ Agapito*. The women, pushed to the front, waved their arms in the air and screamed one against the other. The people and the gentry clapped noisily. Two little chorus-girls, in crumpled red blouses, ventured out and cried shrilly :

“ Look at us, young men ! Courage ! Side with the lawyer ! ”

Signora Nonoggi and Pipistrelli’s wife rushed out and pulled them back. The lawyer beamed. He gesticulated triumphantly towards the ten workmen. They still wavered.

“ Lay down your instruments ! Form into line ! I am at your head. What we do to-day we do for the sake of history.”

“ Aren’t you getting us into trouble ? ” asked one of them. “ Things will be quite different again after the next elections.”

The lawyer pressed his clasped hands to his breast and raised himself on tiptoe.

“ Do I look like a bourgeois ? Am I the sort of man who piles up his pennies ? I know what is higher than the highest piles of gold--the happiness of the people ; and I too want to overthrow whatever stands in its way ! ”

He shook their hands. The workmen propped their mandolines against the walls of the *Café Progresso*. The municipal secretary remarked to the gentlemen who were discussing the situation :

“ So the lawyer is an enemy of the rich. In order to

satisfy his ambition he allies himself with the powers of revolution. The demagogue becomes the anarchist."

The lawyer wheeled round.

"And you, Signor Camuzzi, have sufficiently betrayed your true self. Your scepticism, your criticism of human activities, your quietism—all these fine things lead finally into the bosom of the church. Your place is over yonder! Help the envious Savezzo to bear aloft the banner of Saint Agapitus! But on our side——"

With his right hand raised heavenwards he began to advance at the head of the column of workmen.

"—Mars, Venus and Athene hover above our heads and fight for us, as of old when we wrested the bucket from Adorna."

The chemist, Gaddi and Baron Torroni joined the ranks. Giocondi and Polli looked wildly round; a gust of martial fervour surged around them; suddenly, with a mighty "Hohoho!" they all plunged forward.

"Do you see how frightened they are?" said the lawyer to the workmen behind him. "They don't move. And they fancy that they will be sitting in the boxes this evening? You shall sit in them, you. The boxes for the people!" he cried, at the same time colliding with and overturning Malagodi, the shoemaker. But the naked arms of the butcher, Cimabue, stretched like an iron barrier across the path of the ten workmen. Achilles hurled his stout person upon Giovaccone and bellowed:

"For twenty years I have been awaiting this day. I want to see whether you have holy water in your viens too!"

The wagoner was about to fall upon Galileo Belotti, but Galileo gnashed his teeth and bawled "pappapapp" and "buffoon" so terribly that the wagoner reeled back in consternation.

The lawyer found himself confronted with Savezzo.

Amid the surge of battle the two faced each other with crossed arms.

"Now perhaps," said Savezzo, "you are sorry that you failed to recognize my talents earlier. This is my work."

The lawyer surveyed him calmly. Savezzo asked :

"Am I still a hedge-lawyer ?"

"More than ever," said the lawyer, turning away. Savezzo raised his fist, but Nello Gennari seized his arm.

"Oh, you !" panted Savezzo. "If you ever venture in the direction of Villascura again, I shall see that you never come back !"

"I don't mean to wait for that !" cried Nello, hitting out before his opponent.

"Stand firm, Cimabue, lion that you are !" screamed Nonoggi's wife and Signora Malagodi. The butcher shook off his ten assailants one after the other ; only the two young men in large hats and fancy neckties hung on to him with their arms and legs despite his efforts to free himself. Pipistrelli's wife swung her crutchstick over the conductor, who lay on the ground, but little Rina, pale with love and anger, wrenched the weapon from the old woman and drove her away. By weight of numbers the middle classes overwhelmed the perfidious Scarpetta. Coletto and the other boys crawled between the legs of the combatants and tried to overturn alike the friends and the foes of liberty by tugging at their feet.

The butcher had wrenched himself free. His eyes were bloodshot and he was foaming at the mouth. The shrieking, struggling crowd separated to make way for him as he rushed past Nello Gennari and Savezzo, who were still wrestling with one another, and, brandishing his huge, bloody fists, hurled himself upon lawyer Belotti. The tailor, Chiaralunzi, flung himself between

them, and immediately after, the two young workmen rushed upon the butcher with such violence that he fell to the ground.

"Who will rid me of this swine?"—and Achilles again flung himself upon his rival. Confusion reigned once more; then Mancafede, the merchant, began to scream in a voice that they could not recognise as his:

"I am being murdered!"

A hen had alighted on his neck! Macola and Druso, the barbers, struck out blindly with their razorstrops, but the hens only fluttered the more distractedly among the crowd. Coletto and the boys kept shooing them back into it. The people shrieked, covered their faces and ran in different directions. Galileo Belotti wrung the neck of a cock, and then, with her cackling, louder than that of the hens, with her beaky nose and her long arms flapping like wings, Lucia made for him. He took refuge with the rest inside the *Café Sant'Agapito*.

In his place she seized the lawyer and began clawing at his face. He shut his eyes and yelled: "Help! Help!"

No one came; the people were fleeing in all directions; and, seized with panic, the lawyer flung himself on the ground.

At length Lucia let him go; he heard her driving back her feathered flock into her alley; then a wet handkerchief touched his bleeding ear like a caress, and he saw Iole Capitani's soft, plump face bending over him.

"You are not seriously wounded, lawyer?" she said.

"The sight of you, fair lady, would heal any wound," he replied, and he stood up. Swiftly he assured himself that the centre of the Square was deserted and that confusion reigned all around it. He stroked her arm and said:

"Did you mean at this luckless moment to give me the sign for which I yearn?"

She only cast down her eyes.

Then she murmured: "They will see us," and she drew back. The lawyer looked after her and forgot to wipe the dust from his clothes.

"Oh! these women. Should we want to do great things but for them?"

And he turned towards the *Café Progresso*. There they were all embracing one another and calling for drinks. Achilles was everywhere at once with his yellow, red and green glasses.

"We have put them to flight!" he announced. "The *Sant' Agapito* will henceforth be as empty as before, and friend Giovaccone will no longer find such a ready sale for his holy water."

Flowers were brought from the garden of the Palazzo Torroni; the chemist with trembling hands made up a bouquet and handed it to Italia, who appeared in the doorway.

"For your sake, Signorina," he stammered, "we have conquered the priests."

Then, with streaming eyes, he flung himself on the lawyer's breast.

"Oh, my friend! What a day!"

"If it had not been for Mancafede"—and Signor Giocondi clapped the merchant on the stomach, "who knows what would have happened? He was the first to spread terror in their ranks with his hen."

"Every one did his duty," declared the company. "But where was the Cavaliere hiding himself?"

Cavaliere Giordano came forward indignantly from the interior of the *Café* and showed them the shoulders and sleeves of his white costume.

"Those hens. . . I shall have to get it washed."

"The Cavaliere too is a hero," declared Polli, and Italia placed a wreath on his head and another on the lawyer's.

Nonoggi, the barber, appeared.

"So we are victorious! . . . What? Didn't you gentlemen see me? It was I who held back the butcher when he wanted to murder the lawyer."

Several of them recalled the incident. The lawyer himself could not say what had happened at that moment. They filled Nonoggi's glass.

The municipal secretary adjusted his glasses.

"But what reason have you gentlemen for concluding that we are the victors? I fancy that I saw you on the ground, lawyer?"

Since the lawyer did not deign to reply:

"In any case our adversaries do not consider themselves beaten. The fact that they have retired into the interior of the *Café Sant' Agapito* affords no legitimate ground for such confidence. At any moment they may reappear and, less enervated than ourselves by the celebration of imaginary victories, take the *Café Progresso* by storm."

Mancafede, Polli and Cavaliere Giordano set down their glasses in consternation. Then a procession turned out of the Corso on to the Square. It was headed by Coletto, the confectioner's apprentice, who was whistling through his fingers. The boys behind him were whistling an accompaniment to the mandolines and guitars; and in the centre of the group of workmen, led by the two young men with large hats and fancy neckties, marched Cimabue, the butcher.

"Who would have thought it possible," remarked the collector of municipal taxes. "Why doesn't he knock them down?"

They marched on boldly to the lively strains of their

music. The two young men were holding on to the butcher's belt.

"And his belt is undone ! If he makes a movement, they will pull down his trousers !"

The lawyer rose and bared his head. The gentlemen clapped.

Behind the fountain, a little knot of people was still surging to and fro and shouting. Suddenly it shifted apart and between its ranks they saw Savezzo lying on the ground, while Nello Gennari, smoothing back his hair, drew himself erect. As, with shoulders slightly raised, he walked hesitatingly across the Square, several of the women who had come back called out :

"Long live the handsome actor ! He's brave too !"

The gentlemen at the Café were already advancing to meet him glass in hand. The lawyer looked round over his shoulder for the municipal secretary, but he had disappeared behind the others. Mancafede, the merchant, suggested :

"This Savezzo must be turned out of the Club. We owe it to the cause of liberty to exploit our victory without mercy."

Baron Torroni was of the same opinion. The lawyer disagreed.

"We must astonish and appease our opponents by our clemency. The wisdom of the genuine statesman, who stands above parties, demands it." Achilles agreed.

"Who will profit by the squabbling of our citizens ? No one save that swine of a Giovaccone. Cimabue, the butcher, has always been one of my best customers ; these workmen, who never eat anything, had no right to treat him as they did."

"What do you gentlemen think about sending a delegation to Don Taddeo ?" said Zampieri, the teacher. His face was pale and he fidgeted uneasily in his seat.

The tobacconist clapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't be afraid, my friend: As long as we are in power, the priest won't prevent us from securing your appointment."

"No matter," said the lawyer. "It would be an act of high diplomacy. We should shame and disarm the priest, for we should prove to him that we, who worship God in nature, are better Christians than he."

Opinions were divided. Italia pleaded for Don Taddeo.

"He is not a bad priest. You ought not to vex him too much."

Giocondi shut one eye and whispered in Italia's ear :

"You yourself will no doubt vex him again to-day with the chemist."

"Ah !" cried Polli. "At any rate we know now whom he meant by the Babylonian woman. He meant Lucia, the poultry-woman, for it was she who put the pious ones to flight."

Flora Garlinda arrived.

"I hoped to find a battlefield covered with corpses," she said. "In *Bionda*, which I am now studying, so many are slain, and one ought to see it. But instead, you are all safe and sound"—and she smiled scornfully. She advised them not to spare the priest.

"I like him. He is a furious fanatic and stronger than you all. We two could understand one another—if he chose. His trials will do him good. Oh ! Just look what agony he is suffering."

They perceived him now for the first time. In the darkest corner, betwixt the tower and Mancafede's house, his black figure was bent over the wall ; he drew himself up with a jerk, took two tottering strides, and fell back. The lawyer nodded towards him and muttered sternly :

"There you see what defeat means."

Acquistapace and Achilles volunteered to go over to him.

"We will point out to him that the only person to profit by civil war will be Giovaccone," said Achilles.

"And that, after all, we are not enemies of religion," said the chemist. The lawyer pressed their hands.

"Without the support of the Church, the middle classes will be a mere mass of conflicting interests. Go, my friends, go!"

They set off.

The conductor was lost in painful meditation. Suddenly, with trembling lips, he turned to Flora Garlinda.

"Do you like him very much?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Don Taddeo."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I am a fool," he said in a half-whisper.

Suddenly the voice of the priest rang out—shrill, angry, exhausted, as though he had already been shouting for hours:

"You think yourselves victors? Don't you know that God often gives the victory to those whom he means to destroy? The more surely do they persevere in their backsliding. Oh! you victors! You, who by your persecutions are driving your saintly wives into paradise and yourselves into hell! You, who may be carried off any day by your belly, which is your God! . . ."

"How violent he is!" they whispered to each other at the Café.

"He is like a demon. One must admit that Achilles and Romolo are sacrificing themselves for the public good."

"Peace?"—and the priest's voice broke. "I know of no peace with the enemies of God and of his holy Church. What? They say that I sold the bucket to an American! That I have debauched myself with the nuns and hoodwinked the peasants with a madonna

who moved her eyes ! All this you write and gossip about and report to Monsignore in order to ruin my reputation with him—and you come and speak of peace ? Should I accept your peace, God himself would strike me down. But now he will strike you, you ! God, if a miracle is needed——”

Don Taddeo flung out both his arms and his breast heaved. The two emissaries recoiled.

“Perform that miracle !” shrieked the priest to heaven.

At that moment shouts and the tramping of feet were heard in the street by the Town Hall. Cimabue, the butcher, clutching his trousers, rushed across the Square in front of the ten workmen. The gentlemen at the *Café Progresso* slid sideways from their chairs. The butcher passed them and, as he sprang into the *Café Sant’ Agapito*, the panes of the glass door crashed to the ground. Immediately all those who were inside came surging out, they thumped on the iron tables and shouted threats at their opponents. The voice of the priest was drowned in the tumult, but against the dark background they saw his pale hands upraised in a gesture of fervent gratitude.

The emissaries hurried back.

“Not for a million would I speak to him again,” declared Achilles, mopping his brow.

“What cowards you are !” said Flora Garlinda, resting her chin on her hand with sparkling eyes. “Why didn’t you attack the priest ? Then we should have seen what sort of a man he is.”

The workmen too had retreated.

“Come here, friends !” called the lawyer, and he ordered wine for them.

“Let us go home, my friends. Let them go on shouting over there for their own benefit ! That will not alter the fact that we drove them from the Square.

Meanwhile other tasks await us"—and his face beamed in gleeful anticipation.

"Truly, this is getting a little too much," said Baron Torroni.

"And the soup is getting cold," added Polli. "We go the same way, Malandrini, and you too, maestro."

The lawyer held back the conductor, and whispered in his ear: "Courage young man! Your case is not so desperate as you imagine. A man who has more experience than yourself in such matters saw at a glance that she wanted to make you jealous of the priest."

"You think so?"

"He's blushing like a girl! Just you tackle her! The devil! That's what she's waiting for. This is a time for enjoying one's self!"

Iole Capitani was waiting! The lawyer wished them all his own good luck and believed they would have it.

The conductor's heart was in his mouth. Silently he waved aside Polli, who wanted to drag him away. The tobacconist, Malandrini and Baron Torroni set off in the direction of the Corso, accompanied by Italia, who called in vain to Nello. Camuzzi, Zampieri, and the two Salvatoris crossed over to the street by the Town Hall. Cavaliere Giordano followed just behind them with Flora Garlinda.

"Cavaliere, I know a woman who loves you," she said in a smothered voice, and, as he looked at her eagerly: "Oh no, it is not I; it is the wife of Chiara-lunzi, the tailor. She can't sleep, she is ill because of you. She talks of nothing but her longing that you should give her singing-lessons. . . . But those men are a long way ahead. You must make haste!"

The old singer hurried on. Then something hard struck him on the leg, and from across the way a man, holding his arms to his sides, charged straight at him.

"Wait for me, for God's sake!" shrieked the old man, hurrying on with stiff, little steps, which hardly moved him from the spot. Allebardi, the upholsterer, threw another curtain-ring; then, with his arms akimbo, he bowed. Loud guffaws came from the other side, and the lawyer and Signor Giocondi laughed too. Flora Garlinda's eyes sparkled once more as she said earnestly:

"Again I am not to see a corpse."

"It's time I escorted you home," remarked Gaddi, and he took her by the arm.

The conductor did not wait for Achilles to bring his change; he plunged after them into Lucia's alley.

"When can I speak to you, Flora? I have something so important to say to you."

"Bravo, young people," remarked the lawyer. "They will be happy. Let us go too, Giocondi!"—and he exchanged his victor's crown for his straw hat.

The ten workmen snatched at their musical instruments. They set the lawyer and his companion in their midst, and escorted them in the direction of the steep alley to the strains of the Workers' Hymn. The company in front of the *Café Sant' Agapito* jumped to their feet and shook their fists, but no one ventured an attack. The lawyer said: "We are under the protection of the people, Giocondi. What a great moment!"

"Especially for you, lawyer, since you no doubt are going under the protection of the people into the arms of a chorus-girl."

The lawyer simpered.

"I am going to Doctor Capitani; he says that I have sugar in my system."

"The deuce, that's not a pleasure."

"And yet I am going there for my pleasure."

Wagging his finger and with a meaning glance:

"I don't take what he gives me ; these doctors simply want to show off their power."

Signor Giocondi rubbed his hands.

"And instead you are taking something that he would not give of his own accord. I understand. Oh, the lawyer ! . . ."

The tinkling and scraping and laughter disappeared into the steep alley. Mancafede, the merchant, said to Acquistapace and Achilles :

"Now they've gone, all ten of them. Whatever one may think of the lawyer, he's a hateful egoist to take all ten. He might have left five to escort me home."

The merchant's face was distorted in a violent grimace, as he thumped feebly on the table.

"How am I to get across now? Those murderers are waiting for me just in front of my door."

He sat huddled up in his brown woollen jacket.

"They will treat me even worse than the Cavaliere, for they hate me."

"You should not speculate in wine," cried Achilles. "Speculate in anything else but not in wine."

With cool unconcern they suggested how he might perhaps creep back unseen along the cathedral. He only murmured :

"It's all very well for you to talk. You are at home here."

Then Savezzo stood up and came towards them from the other side. As they gazed at him in silence, he smiled sombrely.

"No doubt you were vexed because the people dared to claim their rights and found leaders to voice their demands?" he asked. Achilles replied :

"Are you tired of Giovaccone's holy water, Signor Savezzo?"

"Since you have the bottle in your hand, give me a vermouth!" and Savezzo made himself at home.

"All these sallies, gentlemen, were not aimed at you ; I prompted them, for I wanted to show the lawyer that there are other people beside himself."

"The lawyer is a personality," said the chemist ; "but you, Signor Savezzo, are a knave and a traitor." Savezzo bent his head pityingly.

"You, sir, as an old soldier, do not need to understand how political successes are achieved. The power that I have behind me proclaims who I am ! "

And he motioned towards the other side. The merchant started ; the two others stifled their repugnance.

"None the less I am not of the opinion," continued Savezzo, "that we need be enemies. In order to prove it, I shall go to the Club's next soirée."

"You will be thrown out," shouted the chemist. The merchant placed a trembling hand on his arm.

"For God's sake, be careful !"—and to Savezzo, with his hand on his heart : "Sir, I am the most peaceable of men. I hate civil dissensions and have always worked for reconciliation ; nor, in view of these regrettable incidents, should I have come down on to the Square had I not been compelled. You are a member of the Club. I shall stand up for your rights, even against the lawyer."

The merchant shook his fist.

"He is an egoist, sir, who takes everything for himself. Not one of those ten workmen did he leave, so that I might get home."

"Why should Signor Savezzo drink his vermouth yonder where it is bad ?" said Achilles. "And could you not persuade Cimabue, the butcher—— ? "

"So we are friends."

Savezzo stood up.

"Signor Mancafede, I will escort you to the other side. Trust yourself to me."

The merchant clasped Savezzo's two hands, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Someone wanted to turn you out of the Club, Signor Savezzo, but it was not I. Any one who says so is a liar."

"Oh, gentlemen, an important matter which we ought not to forget"—and Savezzo began to squint down his nose. "At the next soirée of the Club the actors are to give us some music. On that occasion I must be invited to blow on the pencil. What? An artist famous throughout the city is to rank below these third-rate singers? My honour demands that I should on that evening exhibit my special talent and blow on the pencil."

"You blow divinely on the pencil!" cried the merchant.

Achilles said :

"It must be admitted——"

Savezzo squinted more and more violently.

When he and Mancafede had left, the chemist, with bowed head, strode over to his shop. On the step he turned round.

"Everything is passing away," he said sadly, "even the love of liberty. Now they are making compacts with the enemy. Every one is growing timid—even you, Achilles. And I myself—if any one had told me that I would negotiate with the priest! But so it is, and the days of Garibaldi will never return."

He stepped across the threshold, dragging his wooden leg wearily after him.

The *Café Progresso* stood empty; the guests of the *Café Sant' Agapito* had one after the other been fetched home to dinner by their wives. When the last of them had departed, the lieutenant appeared with his two underlings. Wearing their feathered three-corner

hats, their swords and their red-bordered tail-coats, they made the round of the Square, and cleared up the remains of the conflict. From Achilles, who offered them something to drink, the lieutenant received an account of what had taken place.

"We thought it better not to interfere," he explained. "A battle between the citizens is in any case an ugly business; the intervention of the armed force might perhaps have resulted in bloodshed, and we are not bloodthirsty. . . . Fontana, Capaci, I see a collar and a tie by the fountain."

Achilles surmised that they belonged to Bonometti, the barber.

"He got some nasty blows. The chemist had to rub in some embrocation."

"What a nasty affair!" said the lieutenant. "Fontana, take his things back to him."

Then they began to hazard conjectures whether the second performance of *Povera Tonietta* would take place that evening. Achilles expressed his doubts, but Cantinelli reassured him. The middle classes were even more interested in the performance than the gentry. The artisans were playing in the orchestra and not one of them would willingly forgo his two lire or the half-lira for his son or daughter who were singing in the chorus.

"Before it strikes eight, we shall see them coming."

When it struck eight, footsteps could already be heard approaching from all the streets. From the inns by the Town Gate and from the *Luna* and the *Promessi Sposi* hotels on the Corso, crowds of strangers trooped across the Square. The citizens mixed with the peasants, shrugging their shoulders in token of reconciliation.

"Oh! One must have music."

The workmen stepped briskly up the steep alley;

the servant-girls left in their wake the echo of their shrill laughter and a smell of greenstuff and smoke ; the boys outran them all ; and at half-past eight the gentry arrived. Acquistapace, the chemist, no longer needed to practise caution. With head erect he stumped past his wife in his best coat.

They had all disappeared when Flora Garlinda, in her dingy rain-cloak, ran across the Square. Mancafede, the merchant quickly drew back his head inside his house-door, and only after listening for a long time did he venture very cautiously in the same direction.

By eleven o'clock he was back again before any of the others.

When the singing, whistling crowd had dispersed, Flora Garlinda ran towards Lucia's alley. The conductor followed close behind her.

"Are you not satisfied with me even now ? I let you repeat everything that you wanted."

"That the public wanted. And consequently I am now tired out. Good night, maestro !"

"You must listen to me, Flora"—and he laid his trembling hand on her arm. She ran on.

"You regard me as your enemy. Why else should you be so unkind to me ? But I am not your enemy, Flora, I love you. From the first time I heard your voice, oh God ! how I have loved you since then !"

"I don't believe it," she said. "And moreover I don't need your love."

"Every one needs love. Are you not a human being ? Oh, that I might achieve greatness ! You should see why I had achieved it—only in order to make you great, Flora."

She stopped suddenly and looked him vindictively in the eyes.

"Have you finished insulting me ? I great through you ! It is too absurd. I will not let myself be vexed."

She was already running on again, her shoulders raised. He stammered close behind her :

" Love makes me talk nonsense, I know it. Forgive me ! One longs to bestow favours when one loves. And yet I know very well that you are greater than I ; perhaps my music will be famous because you deign to sing it."

He panted. She shivered.

" One kind word, Flora. Give me one kind word ! "

They had reached her door. Flora Garlinda turned round.

" So you want to make use of me in order to become famous. I am to live in the shadow of your glory. That may be love ; I expect nothing else from love. But I tell you that your love insults me."

And she entered the house. He rushed after her.

" Ah ! Now at last I understand you. Never again will I forget what a shrew you are ! "

And in breathless, incoherent tones :

" I knew it, I knew it. All the time you only wanted to humiliate me, to drive me to despair, in return for all my love, which you could feel, for all my love. That is over. You shall not triumph. You are wicked and I hate you ! "

On the first floor she stopped breathless. His fists, their knuckles flushed crimson, beat the air ; his face was hard and his eyes like steel. She looked round swiftly and pressed herself against the wall. Suddenly he fell on his knees.

" I have frightened you ! Never, as long as I live, will I forgive myself for that."

He moaned despairingly :

" Now I must go."

She watched him rise and, with his hands before his eyes, droop his forehead against the wall. In a moment she had rushed up to the door of her room, slammed and

bolted it and burst out laughing. As she gazed at her distorted face in the mirror, she pressed her handkerchief to her mouth. Then she heard a loud whisper : " You need not be surprised, maestro, for she loves someone else."

Flora Garlinda peered through the shutters of her window. Below, Nonoggi, the barber was dragging the conductor along the street and was saying with his hand to his mouth :

" She loves the tailor, with whom she is lodging, and he is deceiving his poor, unfortunate wife with her. Don't you know how the tailor has slandered you ? He considers himself to be a greater artist than you, and on Sundays he goes to the village inns and plays his wretched music, which no one wants to hear, because they have heard mine . . ."

The conductor wrenched himself free.

" Oh ! Traitor "—and he dashed through the gate of the house. Flora Garlinda leapt back from the window, turned the key in all the doors and stood there holding her breath.

" Uh ! No, he dare not."

And she watched with the corners of her mouth turned down while the barber dragged the sobbing conductor down the moonlit side of the street.

She felt no inclination to sleep. She took down her hair to wash it, and, looking over her shoulder, saw how its golden stream covered her thin neck and softened the lines of her profile. Then she put her face quite close to the glass and examined the rows of small, white, regular teeth in her wide mouth.

" My beauties ! "—and she smiled mockingly. " They are the most lasting and therefore the best for me, for in thirty, forty years' time their magic will still bring me good fortune. . . . What will have become of those who speak to me now ? And if one day I return here

from the great world, he—he perhaps will still be marching with his band of tailors and barbers to celebrate some saint's day."

A knock at the door. The tailor's wife was standing outside.

"We don't want to intrude," she said, showing the gaps between her teeth.

"You are still up ; then I will join you"—and the prima donna in her petticoat went down to the tailor's kitchen. He was seated over a newspaper which was spread out on the table. At once he leapt to his feet and towered above her with his hands to his sides. Before he had time to dash forward and dust the chair, Flora Garlinda had seated herself beside the low stone hearth on which a flame was leaping up. The tailor's wife pulled the kettle lower down on its chain and offered the young lady a cup of coffee.

"But her hair ! Look at her hair, Umberto ! Never will you see its like again."

She thrust her fingers into the prima donna's hair.

"And you can hardly feel it, it's so soft. Just come and feel it !"

"Perhaps the Signorina wouldn't like it."

He did not stir, but Flora Garlinda herself laid a silken tress over his hand and smiled happily as the soft hair moved up and down with the trembling of his big, bony hand. This man did not presume to touch her. "He loves me just as though I were far away and were famous in every capital."

The tailor said :

"It is well that not every woman has such hair."

His wife nudged him.

"If Rina, the tobacconist's maid, had such hair, he would not have deserted her."

As the tailor made no reply, Flora Garlinda asked :

"Who ?"

"The maestro"—and the woman sat down at her feet on the hearth.

"How unhappy she is, poor little girl ! No one knows what ails him ; he says that he is not in love with any one else, and yet he will have nothing more to do with her. But as for her, if he beat her, she would kiss his hand. That's certain, for she sent away Cavaliere Giordano, who is after all a gentleman."

"The Cavaliere ?"

"Yes, though the poor old man promises to do anything she asks for her maestro. But the question is : what should she ask ?"

The tailor fidgeted on his seat.

"The Signorina doesn't want to hear about these things," he said.

"On the contrary, they interest me——"

Flora Garlinda burst out laughing.

"—and I will tell you what she ought to ask for her maestro."

The tailor's wife clasped her hands.

"If you would only be so kind ? Rina did not dare to ask you herself."

"She should ask the Cavaliere to procure the maestro an engagement with the Mondì-Berlendi company, which is going to Venice in the autumn and to Bologna in the winter. That is a splendid post——"

Her eyes began to sparkle.

"—perhaps a little too splendid for Maestro Dorelengi. But if he hears that he is to get it, he will want to thank Rina ; so the poor child will be satisfied—and whether or no he actually gets the post, what is that to us, my friends ?"

"Quite so," said the woman blankly.

"For he does not deserve to be helped. Your husband knows that."

"He is a bad man," said the tailor. "I know that

now, although he looks good-natured enough. But he grudges success to others."

"And he said that your husband played worse than any of them."

"What a horrid lie ! When my husband gets to work with his tenor-horn, he is stronger than all the rest of the orchestra."

"So you see that the maestro is ill-natured ? I only give you my advice for the sake of the Cavaliere, who is so fond of women. Listen ! Wouldn't you like to have him teach you singing, since you are so anxious to sing ' Poor Tonietta ' ? He will try to flirt with you, but your husband has no need to be jealous."

The tailor laughed frankly.

"And under the guidance of the Cavaliere you will soon sing ' Poor Tonietta ' better than I do."

The woman made a gesture of horrified protest and then smiled foolishly. Flora Garlinda stood up so that they might not see her scorn.

"Well then, I shall send you the Cavaliere."

As she turned round at her door, the tailor was still standing opposite and blinking, as though his eyes were dazed with long gazing at her golden fleece.

Again she held it towards her image in the mirror.

"This hair ! Fresh crowds will gaze at it in continued succession, fresh crowds will marvel at this voice. I shall enrapture generations, be famous among generations as yet unborn. But what shall I myself be feeling ? Shall I be happy ? "

An endless series of obscure and lonely years suddenly yawned in the darkness behind her image in the mirror. She shuddered.

"Why must I be alone ? Why cannot I endure any one by my side ? Are they really all my enemies ? Oh how wicked I am ! "

She gazed at her eyes in the mirror with sombre disgust.

She pulled herself together. "All that is settled. I have chosen."

Bending over the little iron tripod, she poured the contents of the jug on to her hair. But she felt that she did it clumsily.

"I am a pitiful creature as soon as I stop singing. This hair is too beautiful for me ; it is only borrowed from the woman who sings. I hate it because it does not belong to me, because I must tend it for the sake of distant, future generations and never feel upon it the kisses of the man who is nearest to me."

She dropped her arms and let her hair drip.

"What anguish there was in his eyes ! How pale he was with the desire to make me happy ! . . . Do I love him ? . . . Let me !"

What spirit was she entreating ? Herself ?

"Let me love him ! What a good, easy fate that would be !"

Then she flung herself on the bed with outstretched arms. Beneath her mass of wet hair she trembled, her breast heaved as though in mortal agony—and in the huge sob that seemed as if it would rend her throat, she felt that the greatest happiness of her life was forcing its way out. She knew : "That would be the easy lot of the others, not mine. My lot is hard, and I am proud of its hardness." None the less she sobbed bitterly.

Beneath her window Cavaliere Giordano said to himself :

"So the tailor's wife really loves me. In her room alone the light is still burning, and she is crying."

He bent his head to one side and as long as the sobbing continued he stood there smiling ecstatically. The light was extinguished, and the old man stole

back on to the Square. He sat down in front of the *Café Progresso* at one of the moonlit tables. One o'clock struck noisily.

"They are all asleep. As I am not asleep, should I not have consoled the tailor's wife? True, the tailor is strong, and I doubt whether I could leap out of the window now as I did that time in Rome. The Contessa Riotti! She fell in love with me when I created the part of the Duke in *Rigoletto*. She was the handsomest woman in Rome, and she said that I was the handsomest man she had ever seen. Many years later the Bouboukoff woman said the same thing. That was at the time of Caino, the last part that I created. Was not Bouboukoff the last woman who really loved me? The last part, the last woman. . . ."

He sat quite motionless, resting his temples on his hand.

"Hush! Someone is there," whispered Nello in Alba's ear. She whispered:

"Set me on the ground, then we can step more softly."

Supporting one another they advanced very slowly from the last step of the steep alley into the shade of the Town Hall.

"Who is it?"

"Cavaliere Giordano. But he is asleep."

"Shall we risk it?"—and they slipped across the streak of moonlight into the next arch.

"Oh heavens! he moved."

"Why the last?" thought the old man. "Many other women have heard me. Many crowds of people have cheered me. . . . Or was their applause merely a tribute to my fame? For I am famous. . . ."

He gazed round into the darkness as though amazed. Alba and Nello held their breath.

"Behind there they are all asleep, unknown. But

thousands already dead have known me. Women who are still young have dreamt of me and boys have been infatuated with me."

"Why doesn't that old man go to bed? How are we to get past? The convent is closed, and Amica will not be gatekeeper to-morrow morning."

"Here too, oh Alba, we love each other."

The old man listened to the faint splashing of the fountain.

"Yes, that was the best—in my master's garden; my hands were blackened with toil and I sang. No one heeded me—but Giulietta forgot her washing and listened. The water ran from the wash-trough, yes, like that; and it was my voice . . ."

"Let us risk it. Very softly, my beloved, through the moonlight. Round the corner it is dark, and then we are safe."

"Oh, that more dangers might come, so that I might save you from them, beloved!"

"Giulietta was fifteen years old, I seventeen. Were the nails on her bare feet really so pink? How yellow my own are now! Neither the tailor's wife nor Rina, the servant-girl, will want me when they see my nails."

"Now that old man may sleep on. What does he know of your kisses. Kiss me, Alba!"

V

THE municipal secretary walked up to the table before the *Café Progresso*.

"You gentlemen have not yet heard the news? . . . I will tell it you in confidence. We must keep it from the people as long as possible, for we must apprehend disturbances."

"Mancafe-de has turned pale," said Signor Giocondi. "What blow have you in store for us?"

Camuzzi seated himself with an air of importance; he smiled sceptically and was about to speak—when young Savezzo advanced boldly from the interior of the *Café*, planted himself before the table with his arms crossed and said:

"The lawyer has lost his case against Don Taddeo."

"Not the lawyer—the town has lost it," said the secretary.

"It's the same thing"—and Savezzo showed his black teeth; "the town—is the lawyer. It has lost because it listened to him."

"I don't deny it," said the secretary. Polli and Giocondi exchanged glances.

"Is that the reason why the lawyer has not put in an appearance to-day?"

"Signor Savezzo——"

The merchant solemnly laid his dry hand on the young man's arm.

"What are Don Taddeo's intentions? Will he incite the people against us?"

"He has been seriously affronted"—and Savezzo shrugged his shoulders ominously. The merchant wailed protestingly:

"No one but the lawyer insulted him. May he get what he deserves. We will break with him, since the welfare of the town demands it ; we will hand him over. What do you say, gentlemen ? "

Acquistapace, the chemist, banged his fist on the table.

"We all brought this lawsuit, and if the courts decide against us, it means that they are sold to the priests."

"Indeed," declared Polli, "every one knows that the bucket belongs to the town, since the town won it by conquest."

"And with the help of the gods," added Signor Giocondi.

The municipal secretary surveyed them with mocking eyes.

"It is clear that you gentlemen do not know the law. The court of first instance decided that since the Church had for centuries taken charge of and borne the responsibility for the bucket, it had thereby acquired certain rights over this glorious relic . . ."

The chemist interposed :

"All of which only proves that at the present day the priests are still supreme."

"But we can appeal," suggested the tobacconist. Camuzzi retorted :

"I do not know whether the municipality will decide to do that. The lawyer will urge it, but shall we follow his advice ? The fact that his proposal to place a memorial tablet to Cavaliere Giordano on the Town Hall was turned down yesterday hardly suggests that we shall."

"Some people here are fed up with the actors," declared Polli. "It seems that they are to leave to-morrow. Good-bye and good riddance to them."

Signor Giocondi too made a gesture of farewell.

"We know their 'Poor Tonietta' now. I should think we do! When I rinse out my mouth, I do it to the tune of 'See, beloved, see our flower-decked house.' Naturally no one wants to pay to hear it now, so in order to attract the public they give a concert between the first and second acts: Garlinda appears in a ball-dress and Gennari in a tail-coat, and they sing the compositions of maestro Dorelenghi, who is a good young man."

"Let them sing," said Polli, "but in the four weeks they have spent in our midst one misfortune has followed hard upon another. We won't mention the two Paradisis. Vittorino Baccalà used to be an honest young fellow, but now, because one of those little women had him in her toils, he has robbed his master. If only the good families had been spared in this respect. . . ."

The tobacconist gazed between his knees with a woeful frown. Savezzo thrust out his foot savagely.

"And who is responsible for your trouble with your Olindo? For every one knows that he too, in order to pay his yellow-haired chorus-girl, has been dipping his hands into his father's till. Who let loose this band of adventuresses upon the town?"

"They are artists," shouted the chemist. "They leave us with a memory of the ideal."

"And debts," said the municipal secretary, "—as I prophesied for that matter. But any one who utters warnings against extravagance is an enemy of progress, and any one who does not want immorality is a partisan of the Church."

Handsome Alfo, who was strolling round the table, suddenly burst out: "The tenor is a thief! If the lieutenant refuses to put him in prison, I shall kill him;"—and he gnashed his bare teeth. Savezzo looked at him sternly; handsome Alfo retreated into the

Caf , and Savezzo followed him. As he went, he declared :

"Gennari never pays for his breakfast ; he spends all his money at the barber's and the tailor's."

"What a life !" said Mancafede. "But they have all gone crazy. Malandrini will make at least two hundred and fifty lire out of the banquet which Severino Salvatori gave to the actors. Salvatori is on the road to ruin."

"And his evil genius is the lawyer," said Camuzzi. "Any one would think that that man's only concern was how to encourage debauchery in his own person and at the same time to ruin the town."

"The lawyer !" cried Acquistapace. "He is brave and has great ideas. When once we have secured the new theatre, the public slaughter-house, the ice-factory and the army in summer-barracks, we will erect a statue to Feruccio Belotti, the greatest citizen of our town ; it shall stand on this piazza, which will have become a beautiful square, surrounded by arcades, in accordance with his own design !"

Polli scratched his head.

"All these beautiful things would be still more beautiful if there were not so many of them."

"The lawyer induced the municipality to expend four hundred lire in order to attract foreigners," remarked Signor Giocondi. "That seems rather a high price to pay for the one Englishman who is staying at Malandrini's."

The municipal secretary waved his hand elegantly.

"Your disappointment, gentlemen, is shared by many. The lawyer's creative passion is degenerating into a destructive passion, and he does not see how he is squandering the remains of his reputation. I do not regret that he brought the actors here. The consequences of their presence have opened many eyes and

confirmed many opinions which before were wavering. Suddenly men find themselves confronted with anarchy and bankruptcy, and they bethink themselves of that moderation and austerity without which no community can continue to exist."

"The fact is," remarked the tobacconist, "that at mass this morning there was a bigger congregation than there has been for the last twenty years."

"They say that the Sub-Prefect was there," said Giocondi. "Perhaps we ought to start going again?"

The chemist snorted angrily.

"It is not only here that such things are happening. Everywhere reaction is rearing its head, and the government, in its terror of democracy—from which it is none the less sprung—favours it. At the gala performance given by the King in Rome in honour of the Emperor of Germany, was not the whole of the first row filled with the papal aristocracy? The liberal citizens were good enough for founding the monarchy, yet its honours are bestowed not on us but on its old enemies. There are moments when one feels inclined to regret. For, let us be frank, this would not have been possible with Garibaldi, and perhaps our hero was too great when he surrendered his power and forsook us."

"You are right"—Camuzzi sneered—"under Garibaldi and the republic there would be no dispute, either about the bucket or anything else."

The old man spread out his arms.

"Do you imagine I doubted that? Then let me tell you what I believe. This leg of mine, which I lost in the service of the republic—oh! the republic is as young as I myself was then, and, if it were to come now, my leg would grow again!"

Camuzzi rose elegantly.

"You are a poet, Signor Acquistapace."

To Giocondi, who accompanied him, he said:

"What is one to answer to these radicals? They think that they have the truth on their side. But, in the first place, is there a truth? And then, if there is, it would lead us too far."

"Whither away, Alfo?" cried Polli, but Achilles' son only clenched his fists without turning round, and with long strides entered the street by the Town Hall.

"What's the matter with handsome Alfo?" asked the women, as he went past. "Instead of smiling at us, he pulls his hat over his nose, as though he were plotting some mischief."

Some distance from the gate, beyond the laundry, Savezzo emerged from behind a bush. Handsome Alfo began to tremble.

"I know all that you are thinking"—and Savezzo's glance rested heavily upon him. "Woe betide you if you ever let it be known that you have spoken with me. You don't know of what I am capable; you would die as you spoke the words."

"But if it's true," said Alfo, cowering timidly, "if he has seduced her, then I will murder him."

"Murder him! You will be sent to the galleys."

Savezzo drew him on to the field-path.

"People like you don't walk on the high-road," he said, smiling sombrely; and before a chapel at the crossing of the paths between the bushes:

"Here I listened to them yesterday. She said to him: 'You shall not look at the madonna; I am jealous of her.' Then he swore to be faithful to her, and she promised that she would flee to him to-morrow, as soon as the actors had left. . . . Keep that knife in your pocket!"—and Savezzo took a step forward with arms crossed. Handsome Alfo retreated, whimpering softly.

"There they are," whispered Savezzo, before Villascura. "They no longer trouble to conceal themselves. Every passing peasant has seen them embraced, and you, you blockhead, still have doubts?"

Handsome Alfo flung himself on the ground, smothering his moans in the dust.

"If you murder him, you will be sent to the galleys"—and Savezzo silently withdrew, while handsome Alfo, flat on the ground, crept across the road and through the gap in the railing. He threw himself sideways on the soft earth between the cypresses, wound his way from one to the other, and with bared teeth he watched.

Nello flashed a silver mirror in the sunlight.

"What splendid things you give me! Oh, I have a fine lady for my sweetheart, one of the great world."

"I?" said Alba, raising her head from his shoulder and blushing faintly. "Oh, poor me! But you know the women of the great cities."

"How fragrant your hands are!"

"Did you not give me the perfume? You told me that countesses use it. My Nello, you know so much of which I am ignorant."

"A poor singer! How did you come to love me?"

Suddenly she released him. Her dark, glowing eyes gazed into his, and she shook her head heavily. He followed her into the shadow.

"What is the matter? . . . Here it is cool, one can breathe."

"You think so? My love is like a fever, it stifles me. It is heavy as the moon. It drives thorns into my flesh like this bush."

"Alba, what are you doing? Your poor hands!"

"You see? I can no longer feel any pain save my love for you."

"And I?" cried Nello. "What happens to me save what you give me? I see no one; nothing touches me;

but when I am walking alone through the fields, I stop suddenly and blink eagerly, for your dazzling face, oh Alba, draws near to me through the hot air, and I feel your cool breath on my mouth."

She gazed at him, and her eyes were sombre and estranged.

"I don't believe you."

"You don't believe me?"

"Ersilia and Mina Paradisi boxed each other's ears on the Square—because of you, it is said."

He started up.

"But I don't know them! And if they were to slay one another before my eyes, I would stride across their dead bodies in order to reach you!"

"Is that true?"—and bending back voluptuously, she stretched her face and her arms towards him. She began to tremble beneath his kisses.

"And if these should be the last? Nello! The last kisses?"

"So you want to leave me in the lurch, wicked one! Has not the farmer secured the cart for us and have we not seen it? The same cart in which you are to follow me to-morrow morning and into which I shall climb to your side, to-morrow morning!"

"Yesterday, as I was listening to your singing, hidden at the back of my box, suddenly my heart grew faint with anguish lest they should be the last notes that I should ever hear from your lips. I clung to each one of them, terrified when the next one fell; my whole being yearned for and was enfolded by your voice."

"My Alba!"

"You were silent; I had nothing more to hope; my knees gave way. From the wings the servants in their white wigs came forward bearing velvet cushions on which were caskets with presents. What women sent them?"

"Surely you know that the Committee gives them to the whole company and that they are of no value."

"That may be. But how many women back there in the world are waiting for you with their gifts? To how many of them will you sing? Oh, Nello! perhaps we have had all that is to be vouchsafed us. Perhaps you will never climb up to my side in that cart and I shall return alone and forsaken."

"Alba! What has taken possession of you?"

He shook her arms. She gazed away over his head. He could see the sombre gleam of her eye and her clear-cut profile, that seemed to hang over him like a threat. He shuddered and bowed his head, while she said with upturned face:

"But never will I leave you behind with those women. Listen! Listen to the most solemn words that will ever meet your ear. In vain shall they seek the man who loved Alba and who shall love no other woman. You shall be dumb. The echo of your last notes are locked in this heart, which will be turned to stone."

His brain began to reel. He struck himself on the breast; he flung himself on his knees.

"If I could ever deceive you, I do not wish to live. Kill me!"

She stooped down to him; she put her arms softly round his head. They wept.

Alba drew herself up, smiling, her face wet with tears.

"You see nothing, my wicked one. I am wearing shoes from Paris. Are you kissing my feet now? Kiss them! Oh! Now is the time to be beautiful. . . . And you, my beautiful one, do you think I had not noticed that you were already wearing another new suit? Let me admire you!"

He strode gaily ahead of her along the terrace.

Then something black, with bared teeth, leapt out of the ground by his side. A knife flashed. Nello ran—he ran and screamed :

“ Help ! Murder ! ”

“ On to the terrace ! ” cried Alba. “ Into the house ! ”

The pursuer had already cut off the way to the door. Nello sped up the mountain ; behind him he heard a sound like the snorting of some beast. He stumbled on without sense of direction ; he felt sick and breathless. Then he stood still, with no desire left save to face the murderer and raise his arms. Suddenly—as he was closing his eyes—a stone lay in front of him—the stone on which he and Alba had supported themselves that time when the side of the mountain had given way as they were fleeing from Nonoggi and the lawyer ; he recognised the pine to which they had clung to stop their fall. All the past, all that life had been before the point of a knife had been aimed at his breast, rose before him ; Nello gave a long scream, he took a leap and felt a step. From the summit he looked round. In the hollow into which they two had once fallen, handsome Alfo was rolling on the ground and Alba was wrestling the knife from his hand. Behind the last cypresses Nello plunged into the ravine. In a cavity between the rocks he sank to the ground, pressed his hand to his heart and drew a breath. He looked round and drew another breath.

“ Here I kissed the blood from her finger ! Our first kisses tasted of her blood and the last all but cost my own.”

Suddenly he trembled, convulsed with fear and hatred.

“ She was always bent on destroying me. She loves me, but her love is deadly. What do I care for her ; I do not want to die.”

He started, pulled himself together, and then struck the ground with his clenched hand.

"I was a fool ! For four weeks I have been wanting for her sake at one time to become a monk, at another to leap into the abyss ; I have been killing snakes and making myself a target for all the knives in the town. But, when I come to think of it, I am not so great as she would have me, and I shall go away. She may concoct her tragedies without me. I am only fit to be stabbed with stage-daggers, and sing as I am stabbed !"

He ventured out. Below, not a soul was in sight ; and directly above him rose the convent. He looked for the steps.

"I am giddy. To think that the first time I was not giddy !"

He crept on his hands and knees over the last steps. The garden of the convent was deserted ; only the white sunlight streamed through the pillars of the courtyard on to the pavement ; the gate stood open. Safe outside, Nello gazed round in amazement ; he wanted to run and to laugh. In the steep alley he smiled at every woman. More than once he stopped to convince himself that the sky was wide and blue.

The Square was almost deserted ; only Lieutenant Cantinelli was seated before the Café. Handsome Alfio was arranging the chairs. Nello went up to him laughing lightheartedly, but handsome Alfio hastily disappeared.

From the balcony of the Town Hall Signora Camuzzi gazed down fixedly. Nello hastily turned away his head ; then he turned slowly round and met her gaze. Finally they both smiled faintly.

"Good day, Signora," said Nello.

"Good evening, Signor," said Signora Camuzzi, and, after looking down and smiling for a moment :

"So this evening we are to hear you for the last time?"

"I am not going to sing any more."

"What? You have forgotten our soirée at the Club?"

Her smile hardened. "What is it that absorbs all your thoughts and makes you invisible?"

"You are right. I shall sing!"

"Signora Zampieri," she called over to the widow, who had appeared at her window opposite, "has your Nina too lost all interest in her harp-playing? Here you see an artist who has no idea that every one is expecting him."

"But you had only to remind me that among my listeners——"

Signora Camuzzi bowed to him behind her waving fan with a quick, searching glance—and before he had time to finish the sentence, she was gone. Nello snapped his fingers and swung round on his heels.

"Well!" he thought, "why not. . . . Or some other woman! Or several!"

He took off his hat to the empty windows; before the closed casement of the Invisible One he made a mocking little bow.

"Adicu, oh goddess of destiny. I no longer have a destiny; all is once more play and adventure—and to-morrow I fare forth into the world."

With a light step he strolled through the Corso. From the other side, Don Taddeo, the priest, came fluttering awkwardly along. Where the road bent down to the *Luna* hotel, they took stock of one another, and then the priest turned away his burning eyes. "How dusty and sweaty and wretched he looks!" thought Nello. "Is the saving of such souls such hard work? Then he is a fool to save souls."

Don Taddeo flung himself through the doorway of his

house. At the end of the dark passage he listened, and, as all was silent, he clutched the knob of the balustrade and rested his brow on the stone.

Not until a door opened above did he start up. He reached his room unseen and paced to and fro between the bare walls, his footsteps clattering on the stone floor. Again and again he caught himself gazing away over his breviary with an expression of mingled longing and disgust. His housekeeper opened the door and planted her arms akimbo.

"Why, Reverendo? You are in here, and meanwhile your dinner is getting burnt? What are you up to now?"

If only he might hide himself from that hard, suspicious face!

"Nothing, Ermenegilda. Please bring in the dinner."

She lingered grumbling by the table to see whether he would eat it. He ate the food without tasting it, or, if the flavour did penetrate to his palate, he stopped aghast. "Oh, cursed appetite!"

"Don't you like it?" asked the old woman. "Are you ill?"

He nodded several times with his eyes closed and fled into his bedroom. He flung himself down before the image of Saint Aloysius. After a little while he raised his head and listened; with a smile of relief he lifted his clasped hands. Suddenly he recoiled aghast. "Oh, God! I thought you had saved me by filling my poor head with the singing of your angels; and instead it was Tonia's prayer. I prostrate myself before the patron saint of chastity in one last, desperate effort—and what I find is blasphemy! I am lost!"

He began to shriek:

"I am lost!"

"Did you knock?" asked the old woman.

"Madonna ! Whatever are you doing ! You have upset the washstand."

As she wiped the floor :

"What a figure you look, Reverendo ! You have been neglecting yourself for some time. And suddenly you take it into your head to put on your best cassock and make it all dirty. What's to be done now ?"—and suddenly she looked at him sharply. He moved away to the wall and dropped his head on to his breast.

"I can't do anything more," he said, and the trembling echo of his own voice sounded in his ears, hard and metallic, like the frantic tolling of a funeral bell.

"Here's the lamp," said the old woman. "Let's hope the light will distract your thoughts."

When she had wished him good night, he paced the room with bowed head. Then voices sounded below, and hastily he extinguished the light. He listened. With eyes closed and straining ears he moved towards the window ; a shrill woman's laugh rose above the voices of the chattering crowd who were passing by. "She ! Oh, she !"—and Don Taddeo sank to the ground.

He came to himself ; it was quite dark ; and he remembered that he was lost.

"Perhaps, as she laughed, she pointed out to them the window of the lost priest ? For she knows ! She knows that I desired her in the confessional. What ? Do you say that I only touched her dress by accident ? Confess ! I confess. . . . As I turned away my head, full of anguish, a quiver ran through me as though she too had touched me. We touched one another ; we communicated lust to one another, and I, the priest, who have desecrated my office—oh ! no one save God knows why, and yet I am now excommunicated."

He touched himself—and he flung his arms in the air.

"It is impossible ; I am dreaming. What has

happened that I should be cast out from the company of living souls, cast out and damned ! Woe is me ! ”

He stifled a cry of horror, listened and peered out.

“ No one. . . . What I have done is my own affair. Who knows how it happened ? Is not mine an exceptional fate ? It is vain for the pope to damn. It will be of no effect ! I shall become once more the man I was. Do they not all know me ? Do they not look upon me as a defender of the Holy Ghost ? They even call me a saint . . . ”

Suddenly he pressed his hands before his eyes ; he laughed bitterly.

“ A saint ! A saint who clammers up to a church window in order to watch an actress who is playing the harlot ! A saint whom it profits nothing to sleep on the naked stone, so consuming is his desire for her ! In the eyes of every woman he sees the ghastly enticement of the one ; even the hands of poor Baroness Torroni grow hot in mine ; she looks at me and does not know what is proceeding from me. What do I say ? The madonna ! I no longer dare look the madonna in the face ! ”

He bent himself double, sobbing silently.

“ Whither, my God ? I am tainted ; my breath kills souls. My vice has infected the town, so that they have undone themselves with the actors, they have fallen away from God and joined forces with my enemy, the lawyer. The corruption of the town is my punishment and the symbol of my own corruption. For the unspeakable thing has happened and I, the guardian of the spirit, have succumbed to the flesh. The holy spirit which possessed me yielded to the images of the flesh ! Why do I speak of the pope and of punishments ? Though there were neither pope nor God, though all hope of eternal life were banished from this earth, yet the spirit would remain—oh ! what an admission and

what a defeat—the spirit would remain holy, and I who was consecrated to its service and yet have polluted my thoughts with the base air of the unconsecrated, I am now more terribly damned than any of the doomed in hell.”

He stretched up his arms.

“Destruction ! God ! Purge me and destroy me ! We must burn—and she who wrought my fall, I myself—and all who have sinned here : the town must burn ! It is thy will ! ”

He stood erect ; the tips of his sallow hands pointed heavenwards like arrows. The hot air poured down upon them. Don Taddeo felt himself consumed and purified. He closed his eyes, enveloped by divine flames. They raised him up. The city was below him and it too was burning. Before his death the power of his thought had still sufficed to kindle it into flame. Now he was dying, redeemed. . . . He sighed and opened his eyes. He was still alive ; across the way, the light glimmered from the *Luna* hotel. Nothing had happened. Don Taddeo tossed on his bed.

“I am powerless. And I am going mad. What will happen ? ”

He listened in horror. Her voice ! It drew nearer, louder ; she was laughing like a demon. Don Taddeo stopped up his ears and still he heard. He pressed his eyelids together and still he saw the woman enter her room with the man, saw the gleam of her flesh as she loosened her clothes. He cowered beneath the images of his fancy. A scream of delight affected him so violently that he sprang to his feet and looked round. Red waves surged before his eyes and his ears hummed noisily.

“She must burn ! ”

He looked round panting, fluttered distractedly across the room, down the staircase and outside—no one

there?—he glided along the side that was in shadow and down the street to the inn. A light was burning in one window. Don Taddeo stepped back and stared upwards. A shutter creaked and a bare arm gleamed as it pulled it to. Don Taddeo flung himself on the ground and his teeth chattered; with his hands he clawed up the straw from the pavement. . . .

Hush! Voices? The tenor who lodged at the inn! Was he coming?

“Do I know?” said Nello Gennari.

“Oh no,” said Flora Garlinda—and they walked on.

“The people did not always clap without reason. I will confess, Nello, that I have been afraid of you lately. On your benefit night you were really amazing.”

“So that was why you were ill? I am sorry for you, Flora.”

“You need not be, my poor Nello. For I am no longer afraid of you. Since this evening you are just as mediocre as ever.”

With lips firmly compressed, she watched his expression of naïve disappointment. He exclaimed:

“But they clapped this evening too.”

“Naturally the women clapped, for you are certainly handsome”—and Flora Garlinda shrugged her shoulders. He gesticulated:

“If you only knew. . . . Surely one has a right to sing badly when one— O, Flora, I was the happiest man in the world, but to-day I was nearly murdered.”

He started and looked hurriedly round, but the last guests from the Club were threading the steep street on the opposite side of the empty Square. Flora Garlinda turned into Lucia’s alley.

“Nearly murdered! Oh! What an adventure!”

Suddenly her mocking smile faded, and her voice was weary.

"That is so. If we live too ardently, we can never know how we shall sing in the evening. . . . Good night."

From the threshold of her house she called after him lightly :

"Dream of your great past, little one !"

With drooping head he walked towards the Corso. Suddenly he flung himself round, stopped once more, and with face upturned eagerly drank in the night air. Slowly he raised his trembling hands. Then once more he bent his head. The moon shone on his long hair. Nello groaned :

"Alba !"

His sighs choked him. The fountain gurgled in the white silence and the shutter behind the belfry-tower trembled slightly.

. . . . With a jerk Nello drew himself up, he snapped his fingers loudly and dashed off towards the street by the Town Hall. Suddenly sounds were audible behind the closed door of the *Café Progresso*, and Nello started back in terror. Immediately after he put out his tongue at the door and ran on. He flung up his shoulders and laughed shrilly. On the second storey of the Town Hall a curtain was drawn aside. Nello looked round towards the ray of light when he was already near the gate. He shook his head laughingly, and pressed his hand in front of his lips as they parted in an exultant cry:

"Alba !"

Beyond the gate the lights ceased abruptly. Nello looked round. "I thought I knew this road better than any, but how many lurking places there are among these bushes which I had never noted !"

Suddenly he shuddered and stopped with his arms held stiffly to his sides. . . . No, a shadow. Yet it was no laughing matter this morning when that madman

had come after him with the knife. "A madman, yes, and perhaps he is now sleeping with a broomstick in his arms instead of Alba whom he so envied me; for her sake his knife is ready to stab. For Alba's sake I have looked death in the eyes. Shall I look into them again? Oh God! Not yet! . . . Nevertheless I was great, I too! They felt it when they clapped; and I myself felt it. It was Alba who made me great because I loved her. I love her. To her!" He now felt the ground secure beneath his feet. With uplifted brow, he strode on between the shadows of the walls, which sprang out towards him, between the black hedges, through which from time to time a moonbeam darted like the flash of a dagger. A light breeze floated towards him; Nello opened his nostrils. "Her perfume! It comes from her garden, from her hair, from her body, which is passionately awaiting my kisses!" But this perfume kindled him to a more bitter ecstasy than of wont; it breathed something else besides love. "I shall die!" He closed his eyes and bent back his head. With face upturned towards the black sea of night he opened his arms:

"Alba!"

"Here I am, Nello!"—and the hands of his beloved reached out towards him from the shadow.

"You have been waiting for me. I knew it, my Alba!"

"You have come. I knew it, my Nello!"

"But suppose I had failed to reach you? For I forgot to arm myself."

A blade sparkled in her hand.

"That is the knife which was to stab you. I am here, and woe to the enemies of my beloved!"

And softly, her hands clasped on his shoulder:

"You saved me from the snake. Now let me defend

you. I shall do it better than you, for your life is more precious to me than to you."

She led him swiftly across the moonlit space before the villa. When they had closed the gate behind them :

"Here we are alone. Can any one on earth be as alone as we are ?"

She sank upon his breast and with their fingers they traced the outlines of each other's face.

"The nightingale is singing quite softly ; it is singing only for our ears. To-day the roses smell as faintly as though they were asleep. All is hushed, and even our hearts beat softly in their ecstasy. Do you hear, my beloved, how the sea is rocking all around us ? Softly it washes against our island, our dark little island. Let us look out !"

They stepped beneath the silvery margin of the bower of evergreen oaks. Before them stretched a shoreless sea of moonlight.

"And to-morrow our island will break loose and float away, oh bliss ! Here we stand, and I have forgotten everything that is not you, and you have forgotten everything that is not I, oh bliss !"

"Hold out the tips of your fingers into the light—see how the moon is decking them with flowers. Will you weave me a garland of them ?"

"For I forget everything that is not you, beloved. Did I not send away the poor who came for their flour ? For the first time I did it, and I did it because we need the money for our journey, and therefore it is not a sin. For religion tells us first to perform our duties and then to serve God. But you are my duty because I love you."

"And I you, oh Alba !"

"Never did I know with such certainty that you love me, oh my beloved, and that we shall always be happy. Oh bliss !"

" . . . Why did the nightingale stop singing as we kissed ? "

" I did not hear it, my beloved, our kisses were too deep ; but now it seems to me that it sobbed more and more sweetly, more and more terribly and then suddenly it screamed. . . . There it lies."

" It is dead ! "

" We will cover it with leaves. We will envy it, for it died of love."

" I too will die for love, Alba ! "

" How would that help you ? Do you think that I would forsake you in death ? . . . Already we have left the common earth, for see, over there the red sun is rising above the regions of the moon."

" How crimson the sky is ! An unfamiliar city throws the dark outlines of its magic palaces against the burning red. Do you not yearn for it, my sweetheart ? "

" But suppose it were a fire ? "

" A fire ? What fire ? Where ? "

" In the town. Listen, the bell is pealing already, and there, the smoke ! . . . To the left of the cathedral it is rising up, on the Corso. . . . Perhaps below the Corso ? "

" Alba ! It is the inn ! "

" I did not want to say so."

" The inn where I am lodging is on fire ! Now they will miss me. We are lost ! What can we do ! "

" You must go and show yourself to them."

" Let us flee, Alba, flee at once ! "

" They would fetch us back. Who knows what they would think."

" What then ! Yes what then ! " And, as she was silent :

" No. I will hurry away. Farewell ! I will run along the river and jump over the garden gate."

" They will fetch water from the river and see you

come. Better go by the Corso. It will be full of people, and maybe in their excitement they will not notice you. . . . Go, beloved, when we meet again it will be for ever."

"For ever," Nello cried back.

By the Town Hall he could already smell the smoke. On the other side the people were surging through the Corso and out on to the Square. On the steps before the cathedral a knot of people were gathered. Nello, consumed with terror, tried in vain to distinguish their faces. The Square was in darkness. From time to time the black outlines of the crowd were lit up by a flickering glow from the column of flame above the roofs, towards which all were craning their necks. Nello Gennari crept along by the houses. At the entrance of the Corso, which was completely blocked, he suddenly sprang forward, wrenched two men apart and shouted :

"Make way ! Make way for lawyer Belotti !"

"What's that ! Buffoon !" panted Galileo Belotti from the cathedral steps. "Can we make our way through ? And is the lawyer more important than we are ?"

"The lawyer is already at the inn," said someone in the crowd.

"I know," cried Nello despairingly. "I have instructions from the lawyer and I must get back to him."

"The lawyer has no more instructions to give," said Fantapiè, the locksmith, resentfully. "If he had only got us a steam fire-engine instead of you actors ! Now we shall all be burnt."

"Help ! Our feather boas ! Our hats ! They will be crushed !"

The two Signorine Pernici wailed distractedly. They were carrying the whole contents of their shop on their

arms. "The lawyer is done for!" bellowed Cimabue, the butcher. "He has lost his case, and Don Taddeo is to keep the bucket. Come here, actor, I want to throw you at your lawyer's head."

As Nello retreated to the steps of the cathedral, he heard a soft, sinister voice.

"You don't really imagine that this actor has instructions from the lawyer? He only ran away when the fire broke out—no, strangely enough, a moment before; I saw him running."

Nello turned round in horror: from above, Signora Camuzzi gazed down thirstily into his eyes. His breath failed him before the glow of her hatred. "I am lost!" he thought, aghast.

"Do you really think that the whole town will be burnt?" asked Cavaliere Giordano from above.

"Don't speak of it!" implored Mancafede, the merchant, rubbing his legs, for he had not had time to pull on his under-pants. "My uninsured stock!—and my house will be the first to burn."

"How do you imagine that the fire is going to get behind the tower?" said Signora Camuzzi, shrugging her shoulders; but Mama Paradisi flung herself distractedly on the merchant's shoulder.

"My Isidoro, if our houses are consumed in the flames, we will wander out into the world together and begin a new life."

"And your daughters?" asked Signora Camuzzi. But Mama Paradisi waved her aside.

"God will help them too. Alas! Alas! I fear that this fire is a judgment upon us two, because we were happy together without troubling ourselves about religion."

Cavaliere Giordano was wringing his hands.

"What a calamity for me if the Town Hall should be destroyed! The Town Hall on which I was to have my memoria! tablet!"

“ Your memorial tablet ! ”

Crepalini, the baker, turned up his red, nut-cracker face and shouted abusively :

“ So you don't know, sir, that the Town Council refused it to-day ? Oh ! The lawyer's day is over ; he has lost his lawsuit. No longer will memorial tablets be set up to vagabonds whenever it suits him.”

“ Vagabonds ? I ? I who have a house in Florence, full of presents from princes and——”

Nonoggi, the barber, pushed the old man uncere-
moniously aside, made his way to Savezzo, who was leaning against the cathedral with his arms crossed, a little apart from the rest, and whispered :

“ Masetti has discovered that the fire was laid—yes, it was laid on the wooden staircase leading to the balcony. He told Allebardi, for they two are working at the hose, and Allebardi——”

Nonoggi hopped from one foot to the other, struggling for breath.

“ Well ? ” asked Savezzo, nodding gravely.

“ —sent me to you, in the utmost secrecy, to ask you what they should do, whether they should say anything ; for, since Don Taddeo is nowhere to be seen, you, Signor Savezzo, are since the lawyer's downfall the greatest man in the town ! ”

And Nonoggi bowed almost to the pavement. Savezzo's brows relaxed, involuntarily he opened his mouth and smiled, displaying his black teeth and squinting violently down his nose.

“ I shall remember you, Nonoggi,” he said with a grandiose gesture. And, in a lower tone :

“ A more favourable moment will present itself for telling the people the truth. We must act like poltiicians conscious of their responsibility. Go, Nonoggi, and not a word to any one ! ”

“ And your daughter, Signor Mancafede ? ” asked

Signora Camuzzi. "Will she come out if your house is burning?"

"What an idea!" he answered in an offended tone. "For nine years she has not gone out. . . . Oh dear! Oh dear!"—and he crouched down again, stopping up his ears. A sheaf of sparks shot out of the darkness behind and they heard a crackling sound. The people began to scream. The children of Malagodi, the shoemaker, at the window above started clapping, and in the street too shrieks of delight were heard.

"Tell me, Pomponia," cried Felicetta, the servant-girl, "whether that isn't finer than the fireworks at the festival of the constitution!"

"I'll give you some fireworks!"—and the baker pinched her till she screamed.

"Her master's house is burning and she enjoys herself. But the town shall give me back my rent, if it lets my house be burnt. The lawyer! He is responsible to me, since he voted against the steam fire-engine!"

"Down with the lawyer!" shouted the crowd, "he has lost the bucket! The bucket belongs to Don Taddeo!"

Bonometti, the barber, alone protested:

"Long live the lawyer! Don't believe those slanderers! The lawyer is a great man!"

But as soon as he had finished shouting, he was forced to retreat. They all pushed him along, and he repeated, alone and despairing:

"Long live the lawyer!"

"Down with the lawyer!" they all shouted one after the other, down the Corso and up to the scene of the fire. Pipistrelli's wife shrieked in chorus with Signora Nonoggi and Signora Acquistapace:

"Down with the lawyer!"

"Don Taddeo prophesied it. It is a judgment from God, because you brought the actors here!"—and

Pipistrelli's wife brandished her crutch-stick above the crowd. The crowd murmured :

"Don Taddeo prophesied it."

But someone cried :

"There's one of them !"

And with a piercing yell the verger's wife fell upon Gennari, the tenor, who had almost reached the inn. She seized him under his coat with her crutch, and let him drag her along.

"Hold him ! The judgment from God ! Hold him !"

Hands were already clutching him.

"Let me go !" cried Nello. "I am lodging at the inn !"

"Then we'll throw you inside, so that you shall be nice and warm, you handsome fellow !"—and the women, with the red glow of the fire reflected in their distorted faces, lifted him up. Suddenly they dispersed screaming. Gaddi, the baritone had come up and was dealing blows in all directions. Promptly and firmly he pulled his friend away.

"We need someone else at the hose," he said to Lieutenant Cantinelli, who, with his underlings, Fontana and Capaci, was holding back the crowd from the scene of the fire. Pipistrelli's wife, Signora Nonoggi and Signora Acquistapace tried to break through the armed force, but found them impregnable. From a distance they called to the landlord who, with his head clasped in his hands, was wandering round the courtyard of his burning house.

"Hi ! Malandrini ! Now you have your deserts. Why do you shelter the enemies of God ? Now let the actors pay you for your house ! It's certain that they set light to it. Are your guests all safe ?"

"The beasts have been taken out of the stables," he answered.

"But the guests!"

"The Englishman ran down with the actress."

"Oh! If he had but left her to burn. But of course as soon as he stirred, she was awake. There was not much space between them."

"They were seen," said Nonoggi's wife. "Felicetta and Pomponia saw them. No doubt they are now finishing their sleep somewhere else."

The innkeeper stretched out both his hands as though to clear a passage for himself.

"My wife!" he shouted. "Find me my wife!"

"What? Have you lost your wife?"

"I have searched the house. She has disappeared. I woke up, the house was burning, and she had gone."

The women looked eagerly at one another. Signora Acquistapace said:

"No doubt she saved the children and forgot about you in her haste. I can understand that."

"The children," groaned the innkeeper, "are here, but she——"

"Oh! Oh! Look out!"—and the women ran back with their hands behind their necks—while, amid a prolonged scream from the crowd, the wooden balcony crashed down and a tall flame leapt from the ground.

"The shed!" thundered Acquistapace, the chemist, brandishing his fist. "Hi, Masetti, Allebardi! Your hose on the shed!"

"You actors," commanded the chemist, "and you, Chiaralunzi, turn your hose on the roof, for those cursed dry corn-cobs stored beneath it are already burning. . . . But you others, save the shed! Otherwise it will set fire to Polli's house and the whole town will be destroyed. . . . Use all your strength! Open it! Force it open!"

But he himself tried in vain to force it.

"Malandrini, the key!"

"Give me back my wife!"

"But this is beyond a joke!"—and Polli, the tobacconist, forced his way through. "What? I am not to be allowed through? But those others are allowed to set my house on fire!"

He screamed so loud that Lieutenant Cantinelli let him through. Signor Giocondi pressed through at the same time.

"I insured him! Malandrini, did I insure you or not? Less than four weeks ago—and this is my reward: you let your house burn down!"

"So long as it was only a question of your house and not of mine, Malandrini," screamed Polli, "I said nothing. I slept until my wife woke me. Didn't I sleep even through the earthquake? No one sleeps as I do . . . !"

"If you had only paid one single premium! A pretty thing for the company! They'll give me the sack."

And Signor Giocondi pushed back the innkeeper towards the tobacconist.

"I seem to have come at the right moment!" screamed Polli. "Another moment, and my cigars would have started smoking themselves. This crowns all. Turn the water on to the shed! Break in the door! A hatchet!"

The workmen from Salvatori's cement factory and the young men from the power station, who were fetching the water from the river in a continuous file, held their buckets suspended in the air—such was the din raised by the two little old men.

"Keep calm, gentlemen," said lawyer Belotti, advancing towards them. "Friend Acquistapace will take care that the shed doesn't catch fire. Don't you see that the remains of the balcony are already

extinguished ? Bravo, Acquistapace ! ”—and the lawyer clapped his hands softly. Giocondi and Polli gazed at him in silence, their hands on their hips and their faces growing more and more sombre.

“ Everything is going well, I guarantee that,” said the lawyer, placing his hand on his heart. At that they could contain themselves no longer.

“ He guarantees ! The lawyer guarantees ! Look at him ! ”

They nudged each other with their shoulders, tittering spitefully.

“ And in what does the guarantee consist, lawyer ? Are you going to treat me to a black punch at the Café if my shop is burnt ? ”

“ So that was why the lawyer voted against the steam fire-engine,” interjected Signor Giocondi, “ because he intended to make himself personally responsible for any damage by fire. Such is his love for the town ! Such is his citizenship ! ”

Suddenly they both turned round. With their stomachs thrust out and their arms uplifted they waddled round the courtyard, shouting angrily.

“ The lawyer ! A dangerous fool ; that’s plain enough now.”

“ The lawyer is defeated and the bucket belongs to Don Taddeo ! ” panted the crowd behind in the Corso. The lawyer started and put up his hand to the red knitted cap which covered his head and stretched half-way down his ears ; it seemed as if he were about to make a bow, but he bethought himself in time and went towards the hose. Allebardi shouted to him : “ Look out, lawyer ! ” and sprayed his feet. Then the lawyer—holding his coat together as though he were freezing—turned back quite alone towards the middle of the courtyard. The Sub-Prefect, Signor Fiorio, who was passing, promptly seized the arm of his

companion, the tax-farmer, and swerved to one side. The lawyer blocked his passage.

"Everything is going splendidly, Signor Fiorio. Evidently there are such things as premonitions, for only a week ago I persuaded my friend Acquistapace to hold a practice with the hose. That is why his honest fellows are working so magnificently. The fire is, we may venture to say, under control. Even if the roof falls in, what does the roof matter to us, eh, Signor Fiorio?"

As they listened to him in silence, the lawyer's gestures became more and more impressive.

"And even the roof would not catch fire if that donkey of a Malandrini had not put his corn-cobs to dry in the open loft just beneath it. As it is, the fire might easily spread from the loft into the house. What a calamity, sir."

He put up his hand to his red cap. The Sub-Prefect looked round hesitatingly. Some shingles rattled down from the roof. The people answered :

"Down with the lawyer!"—and in the rear the cattle bellowed ominously.

Then the representative of the Government made up his mind ; his expression became unmistakably frigid and he said :

"The nights are already chilly at this time of year, don't you think so, lawyer? Let us hope that the breeze will not cool the air still more."

At the thought of the wind the lawyer turned pale. The town was burning! The sky was a sea of flame, in which his greatness and his glory were being destroyed for ever! He drew his feet together and jumped on a blazing piece of wood.

"Your hunting-boots are splendid for that," said the Sub-Prefect ; and the lawyer now noticed for the first time how he had dressed himself in his haste—only

an overcoat and no collar ! He began to talk very fast :

“ I must have put my hands on these boots by chance ; I have not worn them for three years—or however long it is since care for the common weal has left me no time for hunting.”

The Sub-Prefect looked down complacently at his own immaculate attire. He stroked his beard, threw a glance at the tax-collector and remarked :

“ Perhaps it was revealed to you last night in a dream that the common weal would soon be leaving you time to don those boots once more.”

Immediately the lawyer drew himself up. In a voice that had recovered its firmness he said :

“ Then, Signor Fiorio, I shall be proud to render the common weal this last service. We are all of us, sir, merely the servants of the people, and if the people dismiss us——”

“ Down with the lawyer ! ”

For a second he closed his eyes ; then :

“ —we shall best serve our dignity by thanking them and taking our leave.”

The lawyer turned away and left the Sub-Prefect. At the same moment the roof collapsed round the chimney. Dense clouds of smoke rolled out of the windows of the upper storey. They all held their breath ; suddenly a shrill scream rose from the crowd and immediately they all began to shriek one against the other :

“ There’s someone inside ! Look at the window ! Look at the window ! Someone is being burnt alive ! ”

And now, as the smoke thinned, they could all discern a white figure.

“ My wife, there she is ! ”—and Malandrini rushed forward, with arms upraised, as though he wanted to fly to her. The workmen caught hold of him.

"The stairs are burning. We must bring up the hose first."

"Ersilia ! Come down, Ersilia !" he shrieked, weeping and beckoning.

"It isn't Ersilia !" answered a voice from the back. "It's the actress !"

A moment of stupefaction. All looked up in amazement towards the face at the window, which was gazing out timidly and unsuspectingly above their heads. Suddenly it made a convulsive movement, the mouth opened in a shriek, and while the shriek still sounded in their ears it was once more enveloped in the black smoke.

"Signorina Italia !" cried the chemist. "Help me to rescue her !"—and he rushed round the yard. From the Corso a voice as shrill as a whistle cried :

"Romolo !"

And the old man clutched at his head, helpless and distracted. Chiaralunzi and the actors were pulling the hose up the stairs ; the workmen were hurrying forward with their buckets of water ; when something black darted past them—whether it ran or crept they could not tell, for it was already upstairs and engulfed in the smoke. They only saw that Masetti, the driver, was sitting in a pail, and he declared that Don Taddeo had pushed him into it.

"Don Taddeo ! Ah ! Don Taddeo !" shouted the people, and they craned their necks towards that window in the smoke, from which he was dragging the actress. He took her in his arms and as he rushed away a flame shot up towards him. The people gazed into each other's eyes in breathless silence.

"By Bacchus !" said the men.

"Don Taddeo is lost," said the women ; and

"But if that actress comes down alive, I shall kill her."

"We must pray!"—and the chorus of voices grew louder. Suddenly:

"There he is! A miracle! A miracle!"

With a mighty push the crowd broke past the armed force and into the courtyard. Don Taddeo was leaning against the wall, just by the door through which he had carried out the actress. As the clapping hands drew nearer, he closed his eyes; Italia was fluttering round the courtyard in her nightdress, screaming loudly. The women stopped her.

"Fall at his feet! Suppose you had cost him his life, my Don Taddeo, the worse for you!"

All at once her strength seemed to fail her and she sank down obediently before him. He did not open his eyes, but he turned very white as soon as her lips touched his hand. His long nose twitched, and beneath the torn cassock his shoulders trembled. His hand darted away so violently that her lips could not reach it.

"Isn't it just like Jesus and the Magdalen?" asked the women, while the men clapped their hands right in the priest's face.

"But he must rest or he'll be ill. A saint, a self-sacrificing saint! Look at him, you men! Where were you, with your broad shoulders and all the wine you drink? Cimabue, where were you? A saint had to come, or this poor creature would have been lost. . . . Let me kiss your sleeve, Don Taddeo, and my little Pina will get well!"

They shoved Italia aside, all of them trying to touch him; they held him up—and only when they tried to drag him away: "To your house, Reverendo, you must rest"—did they notice that he was unconscious. They laid him down, and rubbed and entreated and scolded him.

"Stand up, Reverendo, what are you doing here. It is morning, and you have to preach to us."

They listened. Then they reminded him :

"The bucket is yours ; the court has decided that it is yours. The lawyer is defeated ; no one pays any heed to him ; but every one loves you, for you rescued the actress from the fire and you are a saint."

A pause. Suddenly gentle Signora Zampieri clutched at her hair. Then they began to shriek and fling themselves on the ground.

"He is dead ! What is to become of us !"

"No, he has opened his eyes," said a voice as sweet as an angel's ; and they saw Flora Garlinda, the prima donna, her sparkling eyes riveted on Don Taddeo. The priest gave a sigh, looked round, shivered and once more closed his eyelids. Then he stood up, waved aside those who wanted to accompany him—"I have to pray, my daughters, I have to pray so much," and walked out of the courtyard through the passage which they made for him.

In front and alone stood lawyer Belotti. As the priest passed, he moved his hands as though about to clap. At the same time he nodded vehemently.

"That no doubt is how Judas Iscariot clapped," said Crepalini, the baker, who was standing at the head of a group of people. The lawyer turned to him, and a tear trickled down his face.

"For an honest citizen, a noble deed is still a noble deed even if it be performed by a political adversary."

"An honest citizen ?" repeated the baker, and his big head, which glowed with the reflection of the fire, shook scornfully. "We are all honest citizens. None the less we know certain stories about laundries built on land belonging to the relations of certain widows."

"Of certain widows," continued Malagodi, the shoemaker, "who are the sisters of certain lawyers."

"So that," concluded Blandini, the mechanician,

"those relations got an astonishingly good price for their land out of the public purse."

"We remember also," said Fantapiè, the locksmith, "a number of incidents connected with the last election . . ."

"Oh! What a lot of fuss about a lawyer," cried Malagodi's wife, who was standing close by, in a loud voice. "As though there were not a crowd of little lawyers—all of whom he has made himself, libertine and seducer as he is. Andreina of Pozzo has one of them, but do you think the old man takes any interest in him? You see what a godless rake he is!"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, but whichever way he turned voices darted out at him from the crowd.

"Where did the money for the actors come from? . . . Isn't the house in the Via Tripoli a disgrace to the town? But the lawyer stands up for it."

"No doubt they are his daughters," whispered Nonoggi, the barber, to the women behind the lawyer's back, twisting his face into such grimaces that they burst out laughing. The next moment he had slipped into another group and was whispering something else. And then suddenly he was in the arbour to which the lawyer had retreated and with his hand to his mouth was warning him:

"Be careful, lawyer! The people have no good opinion of you; I say so because it's the truth. But I myself—you know only too well, lawyer——"

"I know you, Nonoggi," said the lawyer, and he pressed his hand and disappeared into the shadow. The barber was already at the shed on the other side, standing by Savezzo who had beckoned him.

"Shall we begin? Shall we say that the fire——?"

Savezzo shut his mouth with a snap. He passed his fingers through his hair; then he exclaimed savagely:

"I see the whole situation ; this is the moment—we will act !"

"Back !" cried Acquistapace, the chemist, in front. "Back gentlemen, back ladies ! It is impossible for us to manœuvre."

The workmen made a lunge at the crowd with their pails of water, but they were beaten back indignantly.

"The house shall burn if you wish it !" shouted Acquistapace. "Are we in a state of anarchy ? Lawyer, come here !"

"There isn't a lawyer now !" answered the crowd.

The chemist looked round in vain for his famous friend. The crowd shouted orders to him.

"Climb on to the roof and squirt it from above !"

"He ought to have climbed up while there was still a roof. You do everything the wrong way. Why didn't you fetch down the corn-cobs first of all ? Now at any rate save the beds !"

And they forced their way in. Chiaralunzi, the tailor, turned the hose on them. The remainder of the wooden balcony collapsed sending forth showers of sparks. The people screamed and jostled one another in the dense smoke.

"The end of the world !" groaned Malandrini, the innkeeper, as he took to flight. "Where is my wife ? I am ruined !"

"Malandrini," said the lawyer, advancing from the back of the harbour, "now is the time to show that you are a man. Believe me, there are greater troubles than yours."

"Woe is me !"—and he thumped his stomach with his fists and dug his nails into his round bald patch. "Even my cap is burnt ! I shall have to go and beg !"

The lawyer drew him into the harbour.

"Look here, Malandrini, here are your children

asleep on the table. If they have really lost their mother, which I don't believe, it is for you to console them ! That will console you too ; for in misfortune it is a consolation to be kind."

The innkeeper stood by the side of the table and sobbed.

"That isn't all. . . . Lawyer, I will tell you something terrible. My wife—has gone off with all my money."

"What ? What are you saying, Malandrini ? You haven't——"

The lawyer broke off, for a hubbub of voices arose outside.

"The fire was laid, I tell you. . . . The innkeeper is a rogue. . . . The fire was laid under the wooden staircase leading to the balcony. Masetti noticed it long ago. He was induced to say nothing by threats. They don't want it to get out because persons of high station are involved. . . . Oh ! the people are to be deceived !"

Malandrini sobbed.

"For all my securities were sewn into her woollen chemise. Where else should I keep them ? Isn't a wife the surest thing a man has, surer than an iron safe. What is one to believe now !"

The lawyer was about to speak, but above the din outside Signor Giocondi shouted :

"Ah ! Malandrini, you brigand, this was why you insured yourself and have not yet paid a premium ! But just show yourself and you shall come to a bad end ! Where are you ? Malandrini ! He made his escape, the rascal !"

The innkeeper drew himself up.

"What ? Is he speaking of me ?"

"Let them talk," said the lawyer bitterly. "Such are the people."

"What's that about the innkeeper!" said somebody.
 "Quite other people are suspected."

And the voice of the verger's wife:

"The actors! Don Taddeo prophesied a calamity!
 Now they have set fire to the town!"

"You're a wicked old woman!"

"Isn't she right? Who but the author who lodged
 there could steal while the house was burning?"

"We knew that long ago; everybody says so."

"Quite other people! What do you know about the
 high mysteries? There are things. . . . Who is Don
 Taddeo's enemy and longing to revenge himself? Who
 voted against buying a steam fire-engine?"

"Remember the lawyer's pride. Don Taddeo broke
 his power and after that he was capable of anything.
 Better the town should perish than his power!"

"Oh! The lawyer's a knave, is he? . . . When
 you come to think, all the gentry are knaves! They
 must all be sent to the galleys!"

The screams of the women again rose above the din.

"The actor! the handsome one! We shall see him
 with a thick chain round his neck!"

"It's plain he never looked at you! It was the
 lawyer, the lawyer!"

"Perhaps the actor helped him?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders in the arbour.

"There you have the people! You, Gennari, myself
 —they don't know whom else to blame."

But the innkeeper turned away his head and retreated
 step by step from his companion's side. The lawyer
 looked round: he had vanished. Through the black
 solitude of the arbour lights flashed like red snakes.
 Between the foliage he could see from time to time a
 face like some hideous mask lit up by a wild, darting
 flame. For the first time that night the lawyer sighed.
 He bowed his head and covered his eyes.

Outside there was a violent movement of the crowd. A woman began to scream, because they were trampling her down.

"The actor!" they shrieked. "What are the military doing? Is he to be allowed to burn our houses?"

Nello Gennari was already torn away from the hose, surrounded and flung on to a table. They piled round him the chairs which he himself had saved from the house. Gaddi, Chiaralunzi and Acquistapace had to storm the barricade in order to rescue him. Amazed, Nello saw the gentlest faces in the town pressing upon him, breathing out hatred. Nina Zampieri raised her soft little hands, which seemed only meant for touching the strings of her harp, and clapped because he had fallen and hurt himself. Ersilia and Mina Paradisi, who had once boxed each other's ears for his sake, now joined in abusing him.

"It was he! People saw him! He ran away a moment before the fire broke out. Everybody saw him running out of the gate!"

"Fontana, Capaci! Arrest him! Cantinelli, give them the order!"

The soldiers were pushed forward. Then lawyer Belotti stepped towards them and put his hand to his red cap.

"Gentlemen, a moment! Ladies, you are making a mistake!"

He raised his hand with a gesture of entreaty towards all these howling, hissing mouths, these bodies bent forward to attack.

"I am doing my duty, ladies, and I am rendering you a service——"

"Hold your tongue! To the galleys with you and your party!"—and they began to hiss.

"—since I want to save you from committing an

injustice. For this man is innocent—believe me, innocent. I know all about him, and I know what business it was took him through the town gate. . . . Shall I tell them ? ” he whispered to Nello.

“ No.”

“ You are in grave danger. You have incurred the suspicions of the people.”

“ For God’s sake, say nothing ! ”

“ You are a brave young man. . . . I can only tell you, ladies,” he panted out, “ that this young man is innocent. Have you forgotten the voice with which he so often touched your hearts ? Such a voice does not lie. I, lawyer Belotti——”

He raised himself on tiptoe, stretched up his hand and opened his eyes as wide as he could.

“ —I stand surety for this man ! ”

Suddenly all their threatening arms were directed only against himself. Their hisses deafened him. He could not understand what their voices were shouting one against the other. The men rushed forward past the women. At their head Savezzo’s massive figure suddenly appeared. He was standing on a chair and pointing relentlessly towards the lawyer, and the dark menace of the whole mob seemed concentrated in his face.

“ I am here to express what you are all thinking ! ” he shouted. “ Here is one suspicious character standing surety for the other ! ”

“ Quite right ! That’s so ! ”

“ The lawyer no more deserves your trust than the actor ! He too is an actor ! ”

“ Good ! ”

“ Too long already has he been gulling the people ! ”

“ Too long ! ”

Savezzo beat time for the chorus with his left hand.

Then, striking his fist against his breast, which was thrust forward like a coat of mail :

" I, fellow-citizens, will tell you the name of the public enemy, and if I am wrong, direct your vengeance against myself and not against him ! "

" Name him ! "

" His name is lawyer Belotti ! "—and with that Savezzo jumped down into the surging, howling mob, displaying the black teeth in his open mouth, and placed himself at their head ready for the attack. The lawyer was surrounded by Acquistapace, Gaddi and Chiaralunzi. They held his arms, and he showed the crowd his open hands, as though to prove that they were clean. But they only shouted :

" The laundry ! The steam engine ! The elections ! To the galleys with him ! Throw him down ! Oh ! he has bribed the workers too, so that they turn the hose against us. Woe betide you once we get hold of you ! "—and all the while the cattle bellowed and the alarm bell pealed.

" What a hideous fool," cried women's voices, " with his red nightcap ! "

The lawyer's lips moved vigorously, but no one heard what he said. His veins swelled.

" I am your friend," the men who were holding his arms heard him pant. " But you shall see whether I am a man and strong enough to face you all. I shall know how to fight."

" Don't excite yourself, lawyer ! " whispered Acquistapace. " For my sake ! I would rather face all the hostile armies in the world than the people ! "

" They are good folk, lawyer," said Chiaralunzi, the tailor, " but at this moment they are crazy. One must be patient."

From the spot where Savezzo was continuing his harangue, deafening shouts arose.

"What was he talking about to Malandrini in the harbour? Tell them, Malandrini! He was offering to buy your land, so that he might ask double for it when the municipal slaughter house is built here. For that is what he wants! And that was why he set fire to the inn!"

"To the galleys! To the galleys!"

The lawyer panted:

"I am taking note of you! You shall learn to know me! Ah! even you, Scarpetta, whom I have succoured. What? Giocondi, you have the heart to raise your fist against me? . . ."

He was silent; for behind Polli too was shaking his fist. The hand of old Acquistapace relaxed its hold on his arm. He had no friends left. With a proud sense of martyrdom the lawyer's eyes strayed over the crowd of faces. They looked pale in the first light of dawn, except at the back, where they were suffused with the fading glow of the fire. And Iole Capitani, where was she? Love and glory, where were they? All sacrificed to the despotic whim of the people. The lawyer felt his indignation rise. "What you need is a reign of terror!"

Near by, his brother, Galileo was repeating the shouts of the crowd:

"To the galleys! Pappappapp, of course, to the galleys—where else should one send buffoons! He wanted to attract attention, he wanted to play the great man, and now he is to be sent to the galleys."

From below, beneath the legs of the crowd, from time to time a smothered wail rose up.

"It's all slander! The lawyer is a——"

"What? a great man, did you say? Ah! you shall see!"—and Bonometti, the barber, got more kicks. He wailed still louder—while amid the group of women whom the crowd had pressed against the closed door of the shed, the widow Pastecaldi sobbed out:

"The lawyer to the galleys. So that is to be his end. I always feared it."

"Never mind," said Felicetta, the servant-girl. "Your brother is not the only one. The actor too is going to the galleys. For we know now that the two of them set fire to the house."

"That's the truth!" shouted the women. "For the lawyer and the actor came to blows when they were both trying to get to Italia. In their jealous excitement they upset the candlesticks, and when the fire had started Ersilia Malandrini arrived on the scene. And then, so that the truth might not get out, they bound her and hid her away somewhere. Perhaps they killed her, poor thing."

"They killed her! Men are capable of anything for the sake of a bad woman like that actress."

"To the galleys with the pair of them!"—and a final push forced the protectors of the tenor and the lawyer from their sides. The hands of their enemies snatched at them; then suddenly all the women set up a shriek. They fell in a heap through the door of the shed, which had opened, and rolled into the hay, one on top of the other, screaming beneath their upturned skirts. . . . Suddenly they were silent. Something moved in the darkness of the shed, there were stifled cries and then stupefied silence. The crowd halted and stared inside. The first petrified faces appeared in the doorway, and among them, in her nightdress, Signora Malandrini. Behind her Baron Torroni advanced reluctantly.

The crowd began to laugh, at first in vehement outbursts, between which they stopped and reflected, then in continuous peals which spread away over the courtyard, down the Corso and on to the Square. Those behind laughed until they sat down on the pave-

ment : " Malandrini's wife has—oh ! that's carrying it a bit too far ; his house is burning, but she and the Baron are amusing themselves"—and they went on laughing, while those in front by the shed clapped the pair. Signora Malandrini called angrily to her husband :

" What are you thinking of ? You let our house burn and you shut me up in the shed ? "

" My wife !"—and the innkeeper flung his arms round her neck with a hoarse cry.

" The papers ? Have you got them ? " he panted.

" Why of course, who else should have them ? "

Thereupon Malandrini turned to the crowd, his face lit up with sudden rapture.

" We still live," he sobbed. " We are still here."

" And the Baron too," they retorted.

" He happened to be there," said the woman. The Baron explained gruffly that he had smelt the fire and had gone to have a look in the shed.

" But you push me, your wife inside and lock me in ! "

" Quite right ! You lost your head, poor Malandrini ! " shouted the crowd, shaking with laughter. The innkeeper put up his hand to his bald patch. His wife went on scolding him for leaving her all that time with a gentleman in her nightdress.

" Could I come out and show the whole town what only you should see ? Give me your coat and come back into the house to look for some clothes ! "

The crowd cleared a passage for them as they had done for Don Taddeo, the saint, and clapped as they passed. Suddenly several voices shouted simultaneously :

" But the actress ! So it was not she the Baron visited when he came to the inn ! "

" Evidently—and as far as the Baron is concerned she is innocent."

"What, only the Baron? Perhaps the lawyer too was only boasting about her?"

"The actress is an honest girl!"

"How the men slander us!" cried Mama Paradisi.

"We girls are very much to be pitied," remarked Felicetta and Pomponia. "The actress, as we always said, is as honest as we are."

"Who can say now," said Signora Zampieri with gentle emphasis, "that she allowed him anything that she ought not to have allowed?"

"Who indeed?" repeated the crowd threateningly.

Polli, Giocondi and Cantinelli looked at each other thoughtfully and were silent.

"She deserved to be saved from the fire by a saint!" cried Signora Nonoggi.

"Where has she hidden herself? If we find her, we will make up to her for it."

"There she is!"—and Fania and Nanà, the servant-girls, drew her out of the arbour, where young Severino Salvatori had covered her with his cloak. The crowd commended his action. Italia, flushed and dishevelled as she was, submitted to their caresses.

"Her feet are icy, poor dear!"

The women began to rub them.

"Who would have thought that actresses are honest," said Fierabelli, the old ropemaker, to Fantapiè, the locksmith.

"Any one might be glad to give her his son for a husband."

Coccola, the tailor, shouted:

"And Polli, who refuses to give his son Olindo to the yellow-haired chorus-girl!"

"That's very wrong of you," said the men; and the women: "You insult us all."

The tobacconist tried to make his escape, but they stopped him.

"Just look how they love each other!"—and the crowd pulled out Olindo and his yellow-haired sweetheart from behind the shed. They led them up to Polli, who blushed and made a lunge at his son. But the crowd pulled him back; he struggled furiously.

"You really mean to say that this one is honest too?"

"Why not?"

"But if I myself——"

The shouts of the women drowned his voice.

"Oh! We know why he doesn't want her: she's poor."

And from all sides:

"We poor folk are not good enough for your highness. Down with the rich!"

"Girls ought not to be wooed for their money," counselled Giocondi, thinking of his own daughters.

"The heart is what matters!"

"Give them your blessing!" shouted the crowd; and, when an ominous hissing broke out in the rear, Polli made up his mind.

"They might just as well have burnt down my house," he grumbled, "since the night was not to end without some misfortune——"

But, as he joined their hands, he gave his son such a violent pinch in the arm that Olindo jumped. The big yellow-haired girl fanned herself in amazement.

"What a charming family!" shouted the people, clapping.

"Outside, all of you!" Acquistapace, the chemist, ordered his men from behind. "The chimney is going to fall into the house."

But Gaddi drew Nello behind the door.

"Nello, you are in danger."

"I know, but I have already been in even greater danger to-day, and one gets used to it."

"You jest, Nello, without realising your situation,

I have tracked down the charges which have been made against you and I have discovered their source. . . . Most of them originate with one of Mancafede's clerks, who had them from his master, but the latter was standing by the cathedral with Signora Camuzzi."

And as Nello started :

"So it's true. I thought as much—the hatred of a woman. Listen, Nello, make your escape, at once!"

"This morning, when the rest of you have gone."

"That's not soon enough. Before we leave she will have hatched some fresh mischief against you. Surely what she has already done should convince you that she won't rest until she has destroyed you?"

With his arm round the young man's shoulders :

"I foresee disaster for you, my friend."

Nello bent his head.

"Perhaps you are right. And yet, Virginio"—and he pressed his friend's hand—"I can't follow you. I can only follow my destiny, whose name is Alba. Oh! never shall it bear any other name. . . . You don't know——"

And, clasping the other's hand still more fervently in an outburst of rapture :

"This is the last night without her. In a few hours we shall be joined for ever. When the rest of you have left the town, I shall remain here in hiding for a little. Will not the people crowd to see you off, will not the town be in a state of chaos? Then I shall hurry to her : the cart will be ready behind the hedge ; she will be waiting in it : she will beckon to me ; I shall come, I shall come—and, oh Virginio ! after all we shall not have lived in vain. I shall have her at my side wherever life may lead us. . . . And if it——"

He threw back his head, spread out his hand lightly and smiled blissfully.

"—and even if it leads to death, it will be with her!"

A pause, clapping and laughter from the crowd.

"So you refuse to flee?" asked Gaddi once more. Nello too burst out laughing and clapped his hands.

"You're a fine fellow! Flee—when I am under the protection of my saint. Though Signora Camuzzi enlist the counsel of hell itself, what can she do against Alba!"

He pushed his friend out into the morning light.

"And who is plotting destruction here! Men cannot long be ill-natured, life is too good. They wanted to send the lawyer to the galleys. Now they are laughing, and he is laughing with them!"

Fot the lawyer was walking round and laughing. He whispered to his sister, the widow Pastecaldi:

"Pray stop crying, Artemisia! It will compromise me. A public man must be cheerful. So long as they laugh, there is no reason for despair."

"The lawyer to the galleys?"—and his niece gazed up ecstatically out of her white muslin dress. The lawyer exclaimed "Hush! Hush!" and he smothered his sister's sobs with his hand.

"Did you bring my wig?" he whispered. "To think that you should have taken it away to comb yesterday evening of all times. . . . Thank heaven, there it is."

He dived behind his female relations and took off his red cap.

"Possibly I should not have had to go through all this if I had not been wearing that wretched cap. World history abounds in similar momentous accidents. . . . I feel better already"—and he emerged once more wearing his wig. His sister drew out his brown straw hat from under her apron, and immediately he flourished it as he bowed to Flora Garlinda, who was approaching him.

"You are a brave girl; you have dressed your hair!"

"Have you had a bad time, lawyer? Did they hiss you? How are you going to revenge yourself?"

"By doing my duty," answered the lawyer, dropping his outspread hand with a magnanimous gesture. And as she smiled mockingly:

"These people seem to you somewhat capricious, somewhat unruly. But if they were humble, I should not care to be their deputy, for I should despise them—nor their master, for the master is even more despicable than the slave from whose degradation he profits. . . . No!" he shouted to a group of citizens, some of whom, including Salvatori, Mancafede and Baron Torroni, were backing Lieutenant Cantinelli's appeal for an increase of the armed force.

"No, gentlemen! The less force is exercised in the world the better!"

"But as regards yourself," said Flora Garlinda. "I only came to help you to wreak your revenge."

"What?"

"For I owe you some return for your article in *La Campana del Popolo*. You shall see that no one loses anything by taking my part. . . . Let us step aside. . . . You have been accused of setting fire to this house. What would you say——"

She drooped her head to one side. Her hands opened and closed in the pockets of her dingy rain-cloak.

"—if I were to tell you who really set fire to it?"

Then, as he only gaped, she said, pronouncing each syllable lightly and clearly:

"It was Don Taddeo, the saint."

The lawyer started back. He saw her quietly close her lips as though everything were settled. Then he began to hurl himself distractedly from side to side, thrusting out his neck in all directions; his eyeballs

protruded and from time to time he groaned heavily. Finally he mopped his brow and hissed out under his breath :

"It would be useless. Who would believe me ? . . . For that matter I don't believe it myself."

She waited until he had quite recovered. Her eyes glittered.

"It was Don Taddeo," she repeated with a smile which made her beautiful. The lawyer gasped out passionately :

"But how do you know ? Did you see anything ?"

"No more than yourself. No more than all might have seen, here in this courtyard crammed with people, when Don Taddeo rescued Italia and when he lay in a swoon."

"And from the fact that he is a hero—for, it has to be admitted, the priest is a hero and, if he were not an enemy of the state, I should call him a good citizen—from this fact you draw the conclusion that he committed a base crime ? You are joking, Signorina."

"I have proofs. But the most important seems to me that it would match with his character. . . . Don't be indignant, lawyer ! It would match with his character so much better than with yours. Since I saw him, after your battle on the Square, conquered as he was, writhing in torment behind his bell-tower, I know him and if he and I were now to have a few word's talk concerning the fire, Italia and the rest, I am certain that we should understand one another."

"Oh ! Oh !"

The lawyer leant back and expanding his chest gave vent to a deep, contented laugh.

"Now I understand everything. Truly I had forgotten that you are an artist."

He drew her hand out of her pocket and kissed it.

"A great artist !"

"As you please," said Flora Garlinda, shrugging her shoulders.

"Stop him!" shrieked the crowd, and several people sat down violently on the ground, because Brigadier Capaci had knocked them over as he ran. They could still see his long legs waving in the distance, but Coletto, the pastrycook's apprentice, was already round the corner.

"Have you the sausage?" shouted Malandrini to Capaci, as he reappeared. His hands were empty, the boys cheered, and old Zecchini proposed to his boon-companions that they should investigate the innkeeper's cellar.

"Who knows whether the fire has not turned his wine into cognac."

"Nonoggi, your wife is wearing a towel on top and a sheet underneath. Is business so bad?"

Now for the first time the people began to notice their own attire.

"What a fright we must have had!"

"Gina, what would you have done if the town had been burnt?"

"Bend down your ear. I should have run to Renzo."

"However low you whisper, I can hear; and we should have met half-way, Gina."

"Doctor Ranucci! The old fool locked up his wife in the house and went off to see what was happening. But Galileo Belotti shouted up at her window that the town was burning. Now she's screaming. Let's tell the doctor that there's a man with her!"

"Oh! How brave our men have been. Masetti! Chiaralunzi! You have saved us all. And they saved your house, Malandrini. What are you crying about? Your beds have got a little wet, that's all; but your wife

wasn't lying in any of them ; she was lying in the shed."

"She was lying in the shed !"

"And now you grudge them the wine ? Our men have sweated for you, you lucky fellow !"

"My husband sweated most of all," said Gaddi's wife, and she displayed his shirt-sleeves to the crowd.

"One must admit that the actors were brave too ; even the young one, although he helped the lawyer to lay the fire. Why isn't he in prison ?"

"Don't talk nonsense !" said Chiaralunzi, the tailor. "When the balcony fell down, I was nearly killed, but he pulled me away."

"No, that was Virginio," said Nello.

"The diligence is leaving !" shouted Masetti ; but he was bidden hold his tongue. Did he want to have the actors go naked, since all their clothes were burnt ? Was he such a heathen that he didn't want first to attend the thanksgiving mass to celebrate the preservation of the town ?

"But these artists aren't all such good fellows," added the tailor. "Once, when our hose-cart was stuck in the burning wood and we hadn't got enough men, I called out : 'Give a hand, one of you !' and yonder fellow was standing there, but do you think he moved a finger ?"

The crowd gazed disapprovingly at the conductor, who, with a large roll of music held firmly under his arm, fidgeted from one foot to the other. The tailor had flushed a deep crimson.

"He may be a maestro and I only blow the tenor horn, but here are we trying to save the town, and the man who refuses to help is not good for much."

The conductor too had turned pink. He flung up his free arm, and then promptly and carefully laid it on his music roll. Turning away, he exclaimed :

"How can you understand? Let me go!"

Behind him Nonoggi, the barber, whispered:

"Do you see how the tailor is stirring up the people against you? He would like to drive you from the town, for he wants to be maestro himself. The tenor, with whom his wife has a love-affair, will help him to get what he wants."

"What can I do?" said the conductor to those standing round. "Was I to let my mass and my opera burn in order to pull out a hose-cart? For these are my compositions, and I dared not let go of them. After all, as you know, there was a possibility that the town might be burnt."

"He is an ill-natured man"—and Chiaralunzi snorted so violently that his long moustache flew up. "He only thinks of himself and his music. We are good enough to perform it for him; then we may burn, for all he cares."

Blandini and Allebardi declared that they quite agreed and that they no longer felt disposed to take part in the performance of the maestro's mass that morning.

"Back me up, Signor Mancafede!" cried the conductor, passing his fingers through his hair so that his hat fell off. "You yourself were anxious about your stock, which is after all not the score of an opera. Was I to expose it to the risk of destruction. I know how much I owe to the town and to this people, who have been moved by the same music as I, whom I love and from whom I derive all that is best. But is it not better to thank them with my works than by saving a house? What does the burning of a house signify compared with Italy, with humanity, which is awaiting my works!"

Mancafede, the merchant, smiled up at him, while the others murmured.

"In any case," declared Polli, "it's we and not

humanity who pay you your hundred and fifty lire."

The conductor turned up his eyes. Then he gazed in silence at the tailor, who was still grumbling. The lawyer who was standing a little way off remarked :

"What has come over us all ! Why do these two fine fellows hate each other ?"

"I beg to inform you gentlemen that the coffee is ready," shouted Achilles, shoving his paunch through the crowd. "You didn't get any sleep last night, so I thought I would oblige my honoured guests by making the coffee extra strong."

He planted himself in their midst.

"All to the *Café Progresso* !"

But those who still remained wanted to see the chimney collapse ; for it towered up alone and unsupported out of the open roof and was dropping more and more askew. They stood crowded together at the entrance of the courtyard ; only Coletto and his friends ventured out and threw stones at the chimney. The innkeeper made a dash at them, but the crowd shouted to him :

"Eh ! Malandrini ! It will topple over whether you thrash them or not. We have suffered agonies all night through your fault ; now we want to amuse ourselves."

"Your wife amused herself too !"

And they encouraged each other to run out and throw stones. Suddenly :

"It's going to fall ! Hoho ! Save yourselves !"

As the chimney-pot crashed down into the house, they all dispersed, laughing and shouting. Only the innkeeper wandered round his deserted yard, moaning and groaning, with his hands to his ears. Lawyer Belotti came up and tried to console him, and although his

efforts were in vain, he let Acquistapace and his companions go off and stayed behind.

"My poor friend, it is clear that he would rather not be seen in my company. Life, let us face the fact, is often difficult."

The next moment he gave a start.

"Here comes Camuzzi !"

He pretended not to have seen him and poked about in the ruins. As he was about to steal into the house, the municipal secretary called after him :

"Good morning, lawyer !"

The lawyer advanced hesitatingly. The secretary was wearing his new autumn overcoat and freshly polished shoes and his person exhaled a pleasant perfume. The lawyer beat his soiled coat and tried to fasten it, but found that there were no buttons left.

"You here, Signor Camuzzi," he said.

"Yes, I got up rather earlier than usual. The people are relating fantastic stories. Perhaps you, lawyer, can tell me what has really happened ?"

"You were asleep ?" asked the lawyer, open-mouthed.

"Since, from the look of things here, it was merely a case of the collapse of a roof, I appear to have done well not to spend the night among the gaping, chattering crowd. And now isn't it time to think about breakfast ?"

He turned away.

"You could sleep !" repeated the lawyer in a tone of amazement.

"Possibly I should not have slept," declared the secretary, "if I had believed in the fire."

"What ? You didn't believe in it ? But the bells were pealing ! The sky was red !"

"My wife told me so when she roused me, but I am so accustomed to the exaggerations of the people ; for the

people—you know that as well as I—live on exaggerations, false rumours and alarms, which to a sober man who loves order are merely a source of annoyance. I am still convinced that the zeal of our good citizens has done more damage to Malandrini's house than the fire."

"Oh! Oh!"—and the lawyer moaned feebly, gesticulating with his shoulders and hands.

"So you deny the sun, Signor Camuzzi! Deny it if it pleases you! My only answer is that a fire can surely not be devoid of all actuality when there is even someone who has laid it."

The municipal secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"I heard something about that. They even mentioned you as the incendiary, lawyer, among many others."

The lawyer began to titter with feigned vivacity. He looked sideways at his companion's face.

"I see that you believe me innocent. Thank you. I will confess to you that, when I saw you just now, I was not without apprehension. Owing to the difference of our temperaments, Signor Camuzzi, we have more than once faced each other as adversaries in public life, though that of course does not justify me in doubting the clarity of your judgment. . . . Would you like to hear the most absurd notion that a heated fancy conceived last night?"

"The night of poets," said the secretary.

"The notion that I myself, lawyer Belotti, who for thirty years have consecrated all my energy, genius and ambition to the welfare of the town, should one fine night set it on fire may perhaps be in accordance with pure, stern logic. But Don Taddeo is said to have set fire to it. You have heard me correctly—Don Taddeo!"

He laughed so vehemently that several of the residents of the Corso came out on their doorsteps. The secretary contented himself with a disdainful sneer.

"We shall be put to the blush before the vagabond who really laid the fire," he remarked—"in case it was laid and in case there was a fire. He will think we are all crazy."

"How witty you are, Signor Camuzzi!"

But the lawyer suddenly gave a deep sigh.

"All this does not mean that I intend to deny my own share of responsibility. The people are right, ah! how right, in calling me to account because I voted against the steam engine."

He laid both hands on his breast and nodded.

"How is it possible not to believe in fate and the envy of the gods? Behold a man who has risen higher than most in the service of the people and who has been ruined by one false step. But the people far from pitying him set their feet upon his breast. And yet they often pity the unworthy. Perhaps they only hate me because we have loved each other too well and for once I was not great enough for them?" The lawyer paused. As the municipal secretary left the question unanswered, he continued: "In any case the people are right. I was guilty of unpardonable negligence when, with a frugality inspired by love of higher things, I voted against the fire engine. I am to blame not only for the destruction of Malandrini's house but also for the state of insecurity in which I left the town, the insecurity of the people who trusted me!"

The secretary shook his head gravely. Then he smiled and raised his hand.

"You have no need to worry. How do you know that the damage would have been less if we had had the fire-engine, against which I too voted? I don't think it would have been, and the clamour of the mob does not convince me to the contrary. For the rest, I adhere to the view that there is moderation in all things—even in fire. We should not act too vigorously—not even against fire."

The lawyer beat the air as he interrupted him :

"The root of the disaster is this : that I desired progress too ardently to take heed for the preservation of what we already possessed. The minds of most men are, however, concerned above all for preservation. So, through my fault, the people were divided, and so, alas ! there ensued civil war."

"There's the lawyer ! He dares to show his face. Down with him !" —and at the *Café Sant' Agapito* they all jumped to their feet. The lawyer took from his eyes the hand with which he had screened them, and his companion saw tears roll down his cheeks.

"My punishment is not my misfortune, but my remorse," groaned the lawyer.

On the other side, they were all screaming one against the other, while at the *Café Progresso* a deathly silence prevailed. The guests did not turn round ; old Acquistapace's head was bowed.

"My friends whom I have deceived and misguided are now afraid and hate me. How strange, Camuzzi, that the only person with whom I can still speak is yourself, who were always my enemy. You are brave !"

"Pooh !" said the secretary. "Since I do not believe in public life, it is not difficult for me to do as I please. Meanwhile——"

The secretary adjusted his glasses before his half-closed eyes.

"—is not this the moment to ask yourself to what purpose you were so busy and active and wanted so much ? What remains of it now that you must relapse into the obscurity of private life ?"

And pleased with his question he made a movement to walk on. But the lawyer still lingered in the centre of the Square ; he took off his hat and gazed steadfastly round the Square, on one side of which uproar reigned and on the other silence.

"What remains?" he answered. "I do not wish to speak of the works which perhaps remain. But love remains. Others who knew me will love the town as I have loved it. And, above all, it is more honourable, whether in a man or in a nation, to desire good and to perish half-way than to go on living without blame because without deeds."

They strode round the fountain; the pigeons flew up.

"They fly up and they settle again," said the secretary. "That is human progress. The hour, lawyer, when you joined with me in voting against the fire-engine was your wisest."

"Oh! I protest. It was not for the same reasons that we opposed it. For you, Signor Camuzzi, even a fire-engine was premature, was too modern, but I was ahead of it, ahead . . ."

"No matter."

"No matter," repeated the lawyer, stretching out his hand. "At any rate we have met for once—when we made the same mistake. Let us be friends!"

He climbed wearily up the steep alley. The municipal secretary turned towards the *Café Progresso*. On the opposite side, old Ermenegilda came out of the priest's house and halted at a little distance from the table where the gentlemen were seated.

"Good day, ma'am," shouted Achilles. "Does Don Taddeo want something strengthening? And how is the saintly man?"

"Yes, how is he?" asked the gentlemen. Her grim face did not move a muscle. She said:

"Is Signor Giocondi here?"

"What's up?" asked Signor Giocondi. She looked at him with calm, penetrating eyes.

"Come with me, sir," she said. "The Reverendo wants to speak to you."

"What?"—and Signor Giocondi placed his finger on his breast. "Aren't you making some mistake? I am Signor Giocondi."

"It's you I'm looking for. The Reverendo has something for you. That's his affair."

Signor Giocondi's face fell and he gazed sheepishly from one to the other. They shrugged their shoulders in silence. Then he pulled himself together.

"Now for it then. Only when a man has not been to confession for so many years . . ."

"My respects to the Reverendo, you know," said Achilles, and the others called after him :

"Mine too, of course."

Thereupon they cleared their throats and put their hands to their glasses. Lieutenant Cantinelli ventured to say :

"A strange business"; and Mancafede, the merchant, whispered : "What can he want?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Polli, and then coughed quickly. The municipal secretary wiped his glasses and suggested in a casual tone :

"He probably wants to know how much Malandrini is going to get out of the insurance company. Priests are inquisitive as we all know."

The others were dumb with horror. On the other side the clamour had subsided; Savezzo came over with his hands in his pockets.

"What's up?" he asked without touching his hat. Signor Salvatori and Polli at once moved apart and pulled up a chair between them.

"We too are puzzling our heads over that, Signor Savezzo. What business has Don Taddeo with Giocondi?"

"A saint with an insurance inspector!"

"The matter is quite simple," declared Savezzo, seizing the chair and thumping it on the pavement,

"Don Taddeo wants to insure his life, for he has seen of what the lawyer is capable."

The gentlemen nodded silently and only Signor Camuzzi shook his head—while the chemist did not look up. Achilles rolled his tongue in his mouth.

"So that is what the lawyer would have sunk to?"

"The lawyer?" and Signor Salvatori laughed bitterly. "Do you know that he promised my workmen an increase of wages if they would stand up for freedom?"

"So you pay for freedom!" said Savezzo. Mancafede, the merchant, whimpered:

"Your party does not buy anything at my store; none of the peasants comes to me; I am ruined; and yet I have never had anything to do with the lawyer."

"Neither have I," declared Achilles. "The lawyer has ruined us all. You, Signor Savezzo, are quite different. You have helped friend Giovaccone to a deuced lot of custom."

Lieutenant Cantinelli said:

"No one ought to incite the parties to civil war, as the lawyer does. Civil war may easily cost us soldiers our position. In Milan the carabinieri were put in prison; and I have a wife."

"The lawyer will console her," said Savezzo.

Polli suddenly brought down his hands between the glasses. His neck swelled and he screamed in a choking voice:

"Now I have a daughter-in-law! And what a daughter-in-law!"

"And you owe her to the lawyer's policy," said Savezzo.

"The actors are packing their trunks and are taking care not to show themselves; they know very well that I would smash their heads. But instead, I shall thrash

the lawyer ! I shall compel him to marry the big yellow-haired girl himself ! ”

Camuzzi remarked drily :

“ It would have been simpler for you to have stayed in your bed last night ; then you would still be without a daughter-in-law. For that matter, if you gentlemen had slept as peacefully as I——”

“ Well really ! ” grumbled Signor Salvatori. “ A man can’t sleep when a robber is going round the town promising the workers higher wages. When the alarm bell began to peal last night, my first words were, as my wife will bear witness : What is the lawyer up to now ? ”

“ That’s so ! ” they all shouted. “ We are in the hands of a robber.”

“ Who will save us ! ” whimpered Mancafede.

“ We are already saved,” said the lieutenant, and he bowed towards Savezzo. Old Acquistapace suddenly drew himself up and brought out his clenched fist from under the table. But as they all gazed at his mouth he closed it again and dropped his head. Only the municipal secretary who was seated next to him heard him murmur :

“ Two sons at the university. . . . Those days are over. . . . One must live. . . . ”

“ It is a fact, Signor Savezzo,” declared Achilles, “ that you are the only man who can save us.”

Anxious silence—but Savezzo leant his hands on his hips and took his time.

“ You have deserved the people’s anger. You backed up the lawyer, and for that you must now suffer in politics and in your business affairs. Adieu, I am going to tell the people that you are conscious of your impending defeat and that you fear it.”

He stood up, but Salvatori and Polli hung on to his arms.

"One word, Savezzo ! Let us understand one another ! What does it cost you to listen to one word. The lawyer deceived us, he threatened us, and he frightened us into squandering the public money and living in a state of war with Don Taddeo and the middle classes."

"How often"—and the lieutenant laid his hand on his heart—"have we cursed the lawyer among ourselves !"

"But for the lawyer," cried Achilles, "no one would have prevented us from placing the public interests in your hands. Signor Savezzo."

And they all clamoured :

"Who intrigued against you ? Who deprived you of the title of lawyer and struck your name off the list for the municipal elections ? Was it I ? Was it I ? . . . But I shall be the first to set your name on the list. . . . No, I, for I have secretly undermined the people's affection for the lawyer. . . . Listen to me, I did more !"—and Mancafede, the merchant, leant across the table, his eyes shining with entreaty. "I went secretly to the Mayor. I begged him to give you a place in the Town Council and, in case age compelled him to retire, to appoint as his successor not the lawyer but Signor Savezzo, our great man !"

"Our statesman, the saviour of the town !" cried Signor Salvatori, waving his arm.

"An artist," added Achilles, "who blows so well on the pencil !"

"Ah !" they all exclaimed, while Savezzo stood there and squinted violently down his nose.

"What do you want ?" asked Signor Salvatori. "We are prepared to sacrifice the lawyer" ; and Polli supported the assertion.

"By Bacchus, hasn't he sacrificed us ?"

"We give him up !" shrieked Mancafede in a shrill

falsetto. "I was the first to demand it. We will send him to the galleys, as the people ask!"

"That is only just if he set fire to Malandrini's house," said Achilles. "Only we must have witnesses."

"It is for you to find them," said Savezzo. "Get rid of the lawyer, and I will be merciful to you."

"We have as many witnesses as we want," they shouted; the merchant clutched the front of his woollen jacket and shook himself.

"I! I saw it! And my daughter, who knows the whole town and sees and hears everything, my daughter says that it was the lawyer."

Camuzzi took him by the shoulders and pressed him on to his seat.

"You'll make yourself ill in a moment, that's quite certain. Your daughter too should alter her diet; then perhaps she would be saved a good many things."

At once they all flew out at him:

"What? You, Camuzzi, you refuse to believe Evangelina?"

"No one has yet dared to do that," and the merchant jerked his finger towards the secretary, "not even you; and it will bring you ill-luck!"

Camuzzi remained silent and only blinked, while around him they clamoured:

"You shall see whether we deliver up the lawyer to destruction! Any one who is his friend and not Signor Savezzo's must fall. Take care, Signor Camuzzi!"

The municipal secretary made a gesture of protest.

"Nothing of all this will happen. Come, I know the town, and I do not believe that anything will happen."

Then Achilles shouted through the hubbub:

"Signor Giocondi! Don't you see that he has come back?"

They all turned round, their arms raised in a

half-completed gesture. Then Signor Giocondi groaned significantly and sat down.

"Well, what does Don Taddeo say?"

"Am I to arrest the lawyer at once?" asked the lieutenant.

"No joking, Giocondi! What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Signor Giocondi, shrugging one shoulder slightly and looking away. "Nothing. He's gone crazy."

"What? Whom are you talking about?"

"I am talking of Don Taddeo. He's gone crazy; he wanted to pay my Company for Malandrini's damages."

All except Savezzo seated themselves in silence. After a time Polli said, knitting his brows:

"Of course, he is a saint."

Signor Giocondi continued: "He says that he is to blame for everything. . . . Now then, what's the matter, I'm merely repeating what I've heard. Don Taddeo says that the lawyer is innocent and that he wishes to pay."

A wild shriek of jubilation, and Acquistapace, the chemist, danced round the table on his wooden leg.

"He won't pay," said Signor Salvatori slowly.

"But he actually tried to thrust the notes into my hand. I had difficulty in making him understand that the Company must first decide whether and in what form it will accept his twenty thousand lire—for that's all he has."

Savezzo, his arms crossed, took a step towards Signor Giocondi:

"What you say is not true! You are trying to deceive the people! Come here!" he shouted across the Square, "this is one of the lawyer's spies!"

Nonoggi, the barber, was over in a trice, and the whole company at the *Café Sant' Agapito* began to move.

But Signor Giocondi, flushed with indignation, blustered :

" I a spy ? I'm an inspector for the ' Mutual,' and if any one tells me that he wants to pay the Company I know what I have to do."

" He knows what he has to do," bellowed the chemist, " and the lawyer is still a great man ! "

" And why does he want to pay ? " asked the barber. Crepalini, the baker, at the head of the muttering crowd, repeated imperiously :

" And why does he want to pay ? "

" Ah ! that——" and Signor Giocondi raised his eyebrows, his shoulders and his arms, " that's a different pair of shoes. He got up from his praying-desk when I came in, and he could scarcely stand. No doubt he had been having a visit from some other saints. What should I know about that ? I'm an inspector for the ' Mutual '."

" He didn't say that the lawyer is innocent ! "

Savezzo thrust both his fists in front of the little old man's face. Signor Giocondi pushed them away.

" He even said that he was more sinful than the lawyer. That the whole town was sinful, but he most of all. And he does not want there to be any more civil war, but prefers to pay twenty thousand lire. For the rest, in a moment he'll explain it all to you himself in his sermon, so leave me alone and go to the devil ! . . . To the devil ! " he snorted to the men who were jostling him.

" Don Taddeo is to pay and the lawyer is to remain in power ! " they shouted, their voices echoing across the Square, which was now filling.

" We are betrayed ! " screamed the baker angrily, and a horrified murmur spread through the crowd.

" Don Taddeo is to pay a hundred thousand lire because we wanted to get rid of the lawyer. . . . Don

Taddeo ? We shall all have to pay. The lawyer will revenge himself by starving us."

"Where is Don Taddeo ?" a woman shrieked from the midst of the crowd. "They are keeping him prisoner !"

"That's a little too much," said the men, and near the bell-tower a voice rose up :

"The lawyer is at the Sub-Prefect's office ; someone saw him there !"

And across the way by the Town Hall another cried :

"The Government is taking his side ; they have telegraphed and a regiment of soldiers will be here in a moment."

"We are lost !"

"Why lost ! Let's go to the Sub-Prefect's office !"

"No, to Don Taddeo, to release him !"

The crowd surged to and fro. Through it, with his head thrust forward, rushed Savezzo.

"Lies !" he bawled in a hoarse, savage voice. "All lies ! I will fetch Don Taddeo, and you shall hear the truth from him. To the galleys with the lawyer ! Or I'll go to the galleys myself !"

But at the cathedral he recoiled. Don Taddeo appeared in the Corso. In a moment the women had surrounded him and were hanging on to his arms :

"Our saint ! Whoever tries to take him from us shall die !" The people rushed towards him with uplifted arms : "Speak, Don Taddeo !" But with a tortured smile and red, quivering eyelids he staggered back from the advancing crowd. His pale, groping hands, at which so many clutched imploringly, seemed themselves to be imploring.

"Speak, Don Taddeo !"

He opened his lips ; his tongue passed over them and the muscles of his throat moved, but no sound came. . . . Now he stood above them on the cathedral steps ;

they all saw him and they began to clap—and suddenly they stopped, for he had gone.

“ Did he say something ? What was it ? ”

“ He told us of a mystery ; for terrible things are happening.”

“ No one heard. No one will ever hear it. The saintly man will die.”

“ He will save us. He will preach to us. Come into the cathedral, all of you ! ”

“ All into the cathedral ! ”

They poured in through the door. Their trampling and murmuring and shouting had already died away ; the last remnants of the crowd had vanished ; and at the *Café Sant’ Agapito* Savezzo stood on the deserted pavement, his chin resting on his crossed arms. . . . Suddenly he thrust out his arm, snatched a bottle from the table and dashed it to the ground. Then he plumped himself on to a chair. Giovaccone slipped out of his dark corner, bowed, rubbed his thighs and asked for the money for his liqueur ; but Savezzo did not move his clenched hand from his temples. Giovaccone touched his knee. Then Savezzo bounced to his feet, thrust his hand into his pocket, drew it out empty, knocked over Giovaccone and rushed noisily into the cathedral.

At the *Café Progresso* they were still gazing at one another in stupefaction. The chemist gave another yell of delight and stamped on the ground, whereupon Polli said reprovingly :

“ It’s no use behaving like a lunatic. The question is : what are we to do now ? ”

“ Go to the sermon, damn it,” suggested Signor Giocondi. “ Perhaps Don Taddeo will say something about the ‘ Mutual ’.”

Signor Salvatori said in a lifeless tone :

“ The lawyer is undoubtedly stronger than any one

could have imagined. To think that he could set all this going ! ”

“ If one only knew ! ” said the lieutenant. “ It’s difficult for the armed force to do anything until we know the upshot of it all.”

Mancafede, the merchant, whimpered to himself :

“ I’ve had enough of it. I shall lock myself in, and let them burn or bombard the town as they please.”

“ In any case it seems,” and Polli scratched his head, “ that we were over-hasty. Maybe Savezzo is only a braggart.”

The municipal secretary smiled as he examined his finger-nails.

“ Didn’t I tell you that nothing would happen ? Now I propose to you gentlemen that we should go to the cathedral. For after all the only certain thing is religion.”

“ Truly,” declared Achilles, “ our wisest course will be to go where all the others are.”

Polli proposed :

“ We won’t place ourselves where they can all see us, and yet, if Don Taddeo wins the day, we shall have been there.”

“ Moreover the public safety demands my presence,” concluded the lieutenant, and they dispersed. The chemist wanted to set off in order to apprise the lawyer of the new turn of events, and i. took their united efforts to hold him back.

“ You have no conscience if you mean to compromise your friends.”

By the cathedral they captured the merchant who had almost given them the slip.

“ That’s very wrong, Mancafede. At such a moment ! ”

Walking on tiptoe, they forced their way through the

crowd in the vestibule. Inside, an awful silence reigned, and only from the high altar a voice cried :

“ Fire ! All shall be burnt ! ”

It reverberated through the host of heads cowering beneath its violence. It echoed down from the pillars and beat upon the awestruck crowd.

“ Not only Malandrini’s house shall burn, but Polli’s house too and all the houses in the Corso ! The Square shall burn ; no one shall know whither to flee ! ”

The crowd trembled. Their ears quivered at every new, terrifying word. Polli twisted his neck distractedly.

“ Perhaps he’s right, and my house is burning ? ”

“ For it was this city over which Jesus wept when he wept over Jerusalem. Not one stone, I tell you, shall remain standing upon another. Woe ! already the Town Hall is crumbling, and I see you crushed beneath it : you, Fierabelli, you, Coccola, you women there—hold that child, hold it ! ”

A prolonged shudder. In the Torroni chapel one of the little Drusos fell down from the side of the stone angel and began to whimper. The mother rushed wailing through the crowd.

“ Things are getting serious,” murmured Achilles beneath the chancel. “ Didn’t he mention me too ? ”

“ Into the cathedral ! ” cried Don Taddeo, and his voice broke. “ Into the cathedral, all of you ! There shall be no other shelter against the rain of fire. Perhaps God will stay his hand if you pray. No, God is counting you : Is there one just man among you, one ? This is the last minute. . . . ”

The eyes of the priest travelled from one to the other ; the sweat broke out on each one of them and they dared not breathe. His lips parted again and before they had uttered a sound a woman gave a faint scream : Signora Zampieri had fallen down in a swoon ; and then the

other women began to scream, with rolling eyes and clasped hands, one behind her, one on the other side, right down the nave and up to the feet of the priest. Slowly he dropped his head on to his breast and said in a choking voice :

“ Not one. Let the fire come.”

A thud and they were all on their knees. Their bent necks trembled as though in expectation of a blow, and the sounds they uttered were like the half-unconscious moans of a dying man.

“ Only one house shall remain standing ! ” commanded Don Taddeo in a shrill voice. “ Only one in the whole town—the house in the Via Tripoli ! ”

“ What ? ” they asked, drawing themselves up. The women tittered. The young men exchanged glances. In the Cipolla chapel a hubbub arose ; Serafini, the pastrycook, stuck his head behind the monument of the good Princess Ginevra and said :

“ There you are. I shall come this evening and I shan’t go away again, since you are to be the only ones left.”

Theo and Lauretta protested.

“ We are like other people, and if Don Taddeo means that they are all to be destroyed, it isn’t fair that we alone should be left.”

And they sobbed into their handkerchiefs—while Mama Farinaggi crossed herself, regardless of the ladies in the pews outside ; tall Raffaella turned her painted face towards Signora Camuzzi and met her gaze with eyes as distant and disdainful as her own.

Mancafede, the merchant, who had spread his hands over his head, drew them away and rose from his crouching position.

“ What ? Oh ! What a bad joke. I really believed that my house had collapsed, that my daughter was dead and that now it was my turn.”

"Who knows what it looks like outside," replied Camuzzi. "So little happens that finally God himself has to intervene in order that something shall happen at last."

Don Taddeo beat the air with his hand ; red spots came out on his cheeks and he screamed :

"It shall remain standing, and your damned souls shall inhabit it !"

"Isn't it amusing !" said Fania and Nanà, the servant-girls, and although they were being crushed more and more tightly against the wall they chuckled with delight. Here and there someone smothered a laugh in a handkerchief. Don Taddeo broke off ; all the colour ebbed from his face—and then, very gently, each syllable sounding separately like the stroke of a bell :

"In heaven it is written : the city perished because of her iniquity. Jesus wept over her, but she heeded it not."

The words echoed into the remotest corners ; and when all had dropped their eyelids, Don Taddeo too dropped his. Softly, in the tense silence :

"For all vices—and this city has them all—are one. The cause of them all is that we do not love God. The supreme commandment is that we shall love God and our neighbour. But we did not love them, and therefore we fell into iniquity."

And in mild, insistent tones that seemed to penetrate wherever a sob broke forth :

"For we do not love God if we do not love our neighbour. No ! It is not sufficient to love a spirit whose name is God. Love men and you will love God !"

He gazed at Signor Acquistapace in the front pew.

"Be kind and patient to your husband, and you will love God even if you do not confess every week."

In front of the pews of the wealthier citizens, right

at his feet, the humbler folk crouched behind their rush chairs. He looked at them.

"Do not hate Serafini," he said to the wife of Cigogna, the petty customs official from the Town Gate ; "if he gave you short weight, remember that he has six children. . . . Speak good of Rina," he said to Elena, the workwoman of Malagodi, the shoemaker, "although she has gossiped about you."

And to Pipistrelli's wife :

"Do not persecute sinners ! We should not persecute either the actors or the lawyer, for what are we ourselves ? If the town burns, where is the man who has not his share of guilt because his sins brought down the fire ? "

Don Taddeo sighed and closed his eyelids.

"What does he say ? What does he want ?"—and there was a commotion among the men in the space between the pews and the pillars.

"We are being smothered and Don Taddeo only speaks to the women."

"He says that we are to love the lawyer," declared Coccola, the tailor ; and Fantapiè, the locksmith :

"That's the last straw."

"He says that any one who hates the lawyer is to blame for the fire at Malandrini's."

"One must admit," remarked the landlord of the *Promessi Sposi*, "that Malandrini belongs to the lawyer's party. Can it really be that one of *our*— ? "

"Probably you yourself were the culprit, Gigoletti, for whose business profits as much as yours now that the *Luna* is burnt ? "

"Every one, when one comes to think of it, is open to suspicion."

"It is terrible."

"One can't hear a word," said Signor Giocondi from behind, beneath the chancel. "Is he talking about the ' Mutual ' ? "

"The smith's wife is sitting in my place," said Polli, standing on tiptoe. "If the middle classes are taking away our pews, they ought at least to leave us our boxes."

"You are all guilty," repeated Don Taddeo, stepping back towards the altar and spreading out his hands. And then his gaze alighted upon a face in the centre of the humble folk at his feet, a face which was unfamiliar and yet which he could not ignore; a face with eyes that probed and challenged, calmly, insistently. In vain he tried to look away; the eyes called him back like the eyes of a familiar saint who for many years had stood above his praying-desk and knew him through and through—yes, was so blent with his soul that she seemed to be his sister with deep-rooted claims upon him. He shuddered and said quickly:

"No! You are not guilty. What do you know? One alone had knowledge enough to sin."

Involuntarily he breathed deeply between the words. His breast swelled as though it would burst.

"For one alone did not love men, but loved God in the spirit: that is to say, he made the spirit his God and through the spirit, his God, became proud and lonely. But his punishment was that one thing still bound him to men—the vilest. He had denied love, and so he had to suffer the pangs of lust; he had to hate himself as one who had fallen away from the spirit, and to hate the world which had seduced him; he had to call down fire upon the world and upon himself; he had to kindle it with his own hand. . . ."

"I can't understand what Don Taddeo is saying; he must be feeling very ill," and Signora Salvatori bent over from her pew to Mama Paradisi. "It's not surprising after having sacrificed himself for the actress."

"They say that he is preaching from the altar because

he was so badly burnt in the fire that he has not the strength to mount to the pulpit."

"But he wants to convert the actors to Christianity before they go away. For he is speaking only to the prima donna, as though he had forgotten all the rest of us."

The women's eyes fastened eagerly on the great golden coil of hair beneath the shapeless white felt hat.

"He is speaking to her ! How he is speaking to her ! There are drops of sweat on his brow. She must be a woman of great merit. What a saint, Don Taddeo ! He teaches us to know men and to be just to them. How he suffers because of our sins ! Look at his eyes ! They are quite dim. . . ."

"What ?" asked Don Taddeo, bending down, drawn forward by those clear, unswerving eyes. "Must I say yet more ? All ?"

He clenched his teeth and panted. Pipistrelli's wife was gabbling aloud out of her prayer-book. The women round whispered to one another. Don Taddeo clutched at his breast and tore from it the words :

"Yes, it was I, I did it."

At last there was a movement of those eyelids which had not once trembled. The terrible, redeeming eyes were lowered. Don Taddeo put out his hand.

"He is reeling ! He is falling ! Alas ! The saint is dying."

They all sprang to their feet and a violent movement of the crowd swept them forward. Before they reached him, Don Taddeo had struggled up from the altar. His surplice fell back.

"Look at the holes burnt in his cassock !"

Weeping faces, imploring hands strained towards him. He stretched his arm above them :

"Peace !" he cried suddenly in a ringing voice.

"The sacrifice has been offered. We are to have peace."

Cease your wrangling ! Cease asking who laid the fire ! He has confessed and he has gone. You never knew him. Accuse no man ! His deed is not his own ; we ourselves——” and Don Taddeo struck his breast, “have committed it ! For we had not enough love. We hated one another, we showed enmity to one another ; each one thought himself righteous, and thus we became a city of unrighteous men, a city which had to be burnt. I accuse myself——”

With uplifted hand :

“—of the civil strife, into which I plunged the city, and of the spiritual pride which destroyed me—and I wish to do penance. Fetch the lawyer that I may hand over to him the key of the bucket. He is a great citizen——”

Don Taddeo faltered, he swallowed in his throat, but he spread out his arms.

“—whom I have caused to suffer unjustly.”

From the dense throng round the altar hands and voices were upraised : “But Reverendo !”

“Whom I have caused to suffer unjustly !” cried Don Taddeo once again in a high, trembling voice. “No one has done more for you than he.”

“You ! You !” they answered him.

He craned his neck still higher as though fleeing from the voices below.

“Love one another ! Be kind ! kind !”

At that moment there was a crash as though the roof were falling in, and an uproar spread through the nave. They saw the women running and a sprawling heap on the ground. They all rushed away from the high altar ; and a head rolled along and stopped before Don Taddeo : the stone head of a woman.

The crowd stood in a wide semicircle, silent and aghast. There lay the head with its stone plaits, gazing at Don Taddeo, who gazed back. He was as white as

the head and he held his hands outspread. Suddenly he threw them before his face and was gone. They saw the tail of his cassock disappearing round the curtain at the back of the altar.

"What happened? That was the devil, save yourselves! . . . No, no! It is from the Cipolla chapel. It is the head of the good Princess Ginevra."

They ran away. Some of the boys had crouched on the monument of the Princess. In order to see Don Taddeo they had climbed on to her head—and what a slender neck Ginevra had! When the head broke off they had tumbled down on top of Fania and Nanà and the girls from the Via Tripoli, and forced them against the railing of the chapel, which closed with a bang and swept a group of people from the steps. There a few of them were still sprawling.

"Look at Savezzo! He has lost a shoe and is looking for it among the legs of the others. How droll you are! Yes, your shoe has got a hole in it, and it's no use for you to hiss at us like a tom-cat."

The women laughed. Savezzo had his shoe on his foot again and he stamped on the ground.

"Don't you see that this is another of the lawyer's intrigues? He wanted to destroy me because I caused his downfall."

The men looked at one another. Old Fierabelli, the ropemaker, said in a hesitating voice:

"Oh! the lawyer is not a murderer."

"We are not to say anything more against the lawyer," said Signora Zampieri firmly. "Don Taddeo doesn't wish it."

"Don Taddeo doesn't wish it," repeated the women.

"What, Don Taddeo! He is ill and he talks nonsense."

In a moment Savezzo was surrounded, and sharp, bent fingers were threatening his eyes.

"Not a word against the saint, or you shall die ! "

"Peace ! Peace ! " cried the ropemaker. "Here comes Don Taddeo with the chalice."

The women hurriedly forced their way into the centre.

But they saw that his hair had fallen down and was hanging in a point over his nose. His left eye looked quite small and his face seemed crooked. They whispered :

"How dishevelled he is ! He has been weeping for us."

Nonoggi, the barber, wormed his way through the crowd.

"Didn't I tell you so from the beginning ? The lawyer will get the upper hand again. Any one who wants to win his favour," and he made a grimace at Crepalini, the baker, "had better apply to me, his friend."

He caught hold of Chiaralunzi, the tailor :

"Up with you, quick ! What are you thinking of ? The maestro is only waiting for you."

"Then he will wait for me in vain," retorted the tailor, "for I will not play in his mass."

The barber was horrified. Old Zecchini interposed.

"Do it for my sake, Chiaralunzi ! I love music ; it is the sister of wine."

They all tried to persuade the tailor.

"It's not a question of the maestro, whom you hate ; it's a question of our edification, the deuce it is."

The women said : "It's a question of Don Taddeo. Do you want to insult him ? "

And while the conductor gesticulated from the chancel in dumb fury, they shoved the tailor up the winding staircase. They kept watch until he was at the top.

"Always you ! "

The conductor's breath came in gasps ; he clutched at his heart.

" I know it beforehand : my mass will be a failure through your fault. But then—— : ah ! when I have you before me I feel of what I might be capable."

Zampieri, the teacher, who was seated at the organ, saw in his mirror the maestro's distorted face and the fury in his blue eyes, and he turned round amazed. The musicians dropped their instruments. Dotti, the little old official, said :

" Let us be reasonable, maestro. We are playing for the glory of God."

" And my glory ? " hissed the conductor. The big schoolgirls in the choir nudged each other and giggled.

The tailor said not a word, but as he tested his horn, he blew into it so violently that they all started. The people peered up and laughed.

" Quiet up there, Don Taddeo is praying, he is confessing his sins . . . as though he had any, the saintly man."

" Signora Eufemia, your little boy's surplice is too big for him."

" But he swings his censer better than yours."

" What were you thinking of during the confession, Scarpetta ? I remembered that the lawyer secured my brother the post of clerk in the Sub-Prefect's office."

Stout old Corvi muttered : " Is it to be the lawyer's last good deed that he gave me that post in the Public Weighing Office ? "

Fantapiè, the locksmith, shook his head.

" It must be admitted that for the last four weeks we have not always acted justly. I really believed that the lawyer had laid the fire. Didn't everybody know it and wasn't the lawyer for freedom and for the actors ? But if Don Taddeo says that it was someone else and that he knows him——"

"It was probably that Englishman, for he left early this morning."

"You are talking nonsense, Coccola. An Englishman! But they say that a tramp spent the night in Malandrini's yard. He has disappeared."

"Why doesn't Cantinelli send his men to look for him. What is the Government thinking of! Civil war and fire! Ah! It may truly be said that we are suffering affliction because of our sins."

And then Don Taddeo in front appealed to God for help. Thrice he cried out for help against the misery of ignorance. "I did not know Thee, O Lord! since I did not know love; and ah, how those who sigh accuse me before Thee, because I did not reveal Thee to them! . . ." Thrice he cried out for help against the misery of retribution—with a long, nasal, trembling cry; and the last echo of his voice, a poor, groping discord, mingled with the opening peals of the organ, which rose up like the moaning sigh of multitudes. The singing of the choir burst out like a great wail and all the instruments joined passionately in the lament.

"That is the *kyrie*. Do you hear me, Signora Eufemia? Oh, oh, I only want to confess to you that your Carluccio is prettier than my Lino. That was why I said that his surplice was too big."

"Oh, oh," echoed along the pews. The people in the chapels trembled.

But Don Taddeo reduced all the sounds of human woe to silence. His voice rose up, lonely and courageous:

"Gloria in excelsis!"

And the choir answered him:

"Gloria in excelsis!"

The notes of the violins seemed to build steps mounting heavenwards, the horns trumpeted solemnly. The organ surged upward like the wind.

As the music died away, Fantapiè, the locksmith, crossed himself.

"I feel that it is God's will that we should fetch back the lawyer."

"I won't say no," answered Serafini, the pastrycook, "but will Crepalini agree?"

For the baker was working himself into a fury.

"Oh! Coccola, oh! Malagodi! so it seems to you quite simple to call back the public enemy? Don Taddeo—ah! Don Taddeo may talk; he is not in business. But what about us? The lawyer will revenge himself on us! You, Scarpetta, will lose the work at the Town Hall, and who knows if he will renew my monopoly."

"What luck for us all!" shouted the young men with fancy neckties; and the baker, flushed purple to the eyes, raged vainly against the people, who were congratulating themselves.

Signor Giocondi ventured forward:

"Since the lawyer has had no say in the matter, your loaves have become even smaller, Crepalini. If you were in power, we should all starve"—and Signor Giocondi winked at the people, who applauded him. He returned, thrusting out his paunch, to the group below the chancel.

"Courage!" he said. "I shall save you all, including the lawyer. Since I spoke with Don Taddeo, everything has been going well. The work of an insurance inspector is the best school for diplomats."

Savezzo came up and said between his teeth:

"And you gentlemen imagine that the lawyer will not find out that you all abandoned him? He will find it out, I swear to that."

"Don't answer!" whispered Signor Giocondi to the chemist, who had made an angry movement. "In our difficult situation one can't be too careful."

And they all drew back from Savezzo. He heard a little cough and found himself next to the pew in which Signora Camuzzi was kneeling. Her head was enveloped in a lace veil ; no one could see her lips move.

" Our cause is in a bad way, it seems. . . . Look at Don Taddeo ! He is praying for our favour ; let us pray too."

She bent still lower, softly fingering her rosary. He gnashed his teeth.

" The facts must be faced. The tenor has escaped me, and the lawyer whom I had slain returns like a ghost."

She was silent for some time ; she raised and lowered her head like the rest of the worshippers. Then she whispered :

" Kneel down ! "

And when his ear was quite close :

" I am not concerned about the tenor ; his mind may be at rest. He imagines that this evening he is going to commit a great sin and seduce a girl who is dedicated to Our Lord. But I shall prevent him from sinning and I shall save Alba. Let me pray ! "

After a pause, with a sigh :

" I feel that Saint Agapitus hears me. Do you forget that he once saved a girl who had fallen into the hands of a seducer by depriving the seducer of all power to be dangerous to a woman ? "

As she heard Savezzo snort :

" If only you had faith ! Then you would have success too. . . . I leave the lawyer to you. You haven't tried to prevail upon Don Taddeo ? In any case it would have been fruitless. He is ill—and the people worship him as a saint, which makes him still weaker. You must give him up and stick to the lawyer."

" To whom ? "

" To the lawyer. You must go to him at once, else

others will get the start of you—and you must offer him your support. You must say to him that now he knows your power and that you do not want to use it against him any more ; that you undertake to bring over your party to him and to rule jointly with himself.”

“Never,” said Savezzo quite loud. She waited a little. Then :

“He will be only too happy to be able to hold on to your hand, and since you will restore peace they will all receive you well. Then time will be gained in which to contrive something new which will finally rid us of the lawyer.”

She bent lower.

“*Libera nos a malo !*”

“Never !” he repeated. “I hate him too much. I should have to dissimulate too long. This town has only room for one of us. If he comes back, then I have lost the day. . . . But he will not come back. I shall forbid the people to call him back. I shall use force. I shall——”

“Hush there !”—and Signora Camuzzi turned to Signora Acquistapace. “Don’t you agree that the people ought not to talk while Don Taddeo is praying ?”

Don Taddeo bowed low and clasped his hands, humble as he whose deputy he was, whose earthly life was conjured back by his gestures. He walked from the left of the altar to the right. “His way was still harder,” he thought ; and as little Nonoggi and Coccola swung their censers and the fumes of the incense enveloped him : “But his works smell sweet.”

“It is high time,” and Savezzo seized Fantapiè, the locksmith, and Malagodi, the shoemaker, by the arm. “Don Taddeo is reading the epistle ; now it is a case of choosing. Do you want to take over the power or to call back the tyrant ?”

" Oh ! The humble folk too are still here," said the shoemaker.

" And Don Taddeo," added Fantapiè. Druso, Scarpetta and the two Serafinis all said the same.

" Without Don Taddeo there is no middle class party, for how are we to win over the people without him ? "

Signor Fiorio, the Sub-Prefect, was standing near by. Savezzo took a step towards him. Immediately he disappeared behind the pillar—and Savezzo felt a sudden chill ; just so had the Sub-Prefect—how many hours before ?—dropped the lawyer !

Every man whose hand he tried to seize put it in his pocket. They shrugged their shoulders.

" Ask the people whether they want you instead of the lawyer. Ask the people."

Savezzo, his head thrust forward, pushed his way into the Torroni chapel, across the steps of which the people were streaming out, bringing with them a strong odour of garlic. They stood in a pyramid stretching to the very altar ; they knelt with their legs overlapping each other ; they carried their coats on their shoulders ; and a young man supported in his arms a girl for whom there was no room on the ground.

" Here I am ! Here is the man who has set you free ! " and Savezzo tried to flourish his arms, but those with whom they came in contact struck them down again. Instead of his arms, he rolled his eyes.

" The lawyer is overthrown ! Now you shall learn the meaning of liberty ! "

" Leave us in peace ! Can't you see that you are trampling on us ? "

" I am not a gentleman, I am one of yourselves. See here ! "—and he hopped on one foot in order to squeeze out the other. " My shoes are in holes. And here ! "

He held out his clumsy fingers with their broken nails. They answered :

"The shoes and the hands are all right, but we don't like your face."

The man who was holding up the girl said : "You think too much about yourself to love liberty."

"Don Taddeo doesn't want you, he wants the lawyer," cried a woman ; and another :

"The lawyer is jollier than you ; he likes women and the people."

At the altar a young man with a fancy necktie was holding his arms crossed so as to make room for his neighbours. He looked down into Savezzo's eyes.

"The lawyer loves liberty ; we can feel that. You, Signor Savezzo, want to be admired, and if it would help you to overthrow the lawyer, you would walk on a rope stretched from the bell-tower to the Town Hall."

They all murmured approval. Someone with his face wrapped in a handkerchief said :

"The lawyer is a great man."

Over in the corner someone even tried to clap. The conductor up in the chancel heard it.

"Oh yes, I am quite aware that it is beautiful"—and he beat time very gently, with a pinched smile, his head bent to one side.

"And the reason why this Gradual is so beautiful is that I composed it that night when Flora Garlinda was so cruel and made me so unhappy. What a good thing I had that terrible night ! Then it became evident that all I had suffered on her account fitted into this 'Advance of the spiritual life' ; and when it was finished I was certain that I had won her and in my joy I at once composed my Hallelujah !" With his baton in the air he looked towards Don Taddeo. Suddenly his heart beat violently. "My Hallelujah !

Now it is coming ! To live just this one more minute ! ”
And his baton trembled.

“ Hallelujah ! ” sang Don Taddeo.

The conductor gave one more swift glance at them all. As he slowly dropped his hand a smile of feverish bliss involuntarily overspread his face. . . . Then he started. “ The tenor horn ! I knew it.” Suddenly his face was as white as the pillar behind him, his eyes were wild and his neck outstretched.

“ Out of tune, Chiaralunzi ! Of course you must play out of tune.”

“ He does it on purpose in order to spoil your success,” whispered Nonoggi, the barber, over his clarionet, while the tailor, his face flushed crimson, pushed away his horn.

“ What ? You dare to stop playing in the middle ? I do you wrong ? Well then ”—and the conductor leapt down from his desk with his arms uplifted—“ take the baton yourself, you will use it better, since you know my music better than I do.”

One after the other they set down their instruments ; the singing of the choir died away. Only the organ continued the Hallelujah to the end, and Nina Zampieri scattered a few notes from her harp like raindrops in a thunderstorm. The tailor had overturned his chair ; they stood facing one another. The conductor’s eyes were darting out of his head and his face had a bluish tinge. He clutched at his throat and in a hoarse voice he said :

“ You think that because your wife sleeps with a tenor you know something about music.”

In a moment they were all on their feet. The combined strength of Allebardi, Blandini and young Mandolini was insufficient to hold the tailor. Handsome Alfo hung on to his leg, while Nonoggi and Dotti, the little old official, fled down the winding staircase.

The choir pressed themselves against the walls. Someone cried : " Help ! "

" Why are you trampling about up there ? " asked the people. " What's the matter ? "

Zampieri, the teacher, leant over.

" The maestro isn't well. It's such an exacting work and he wrote it himself."

" We must be quiet now. Pipistrelli has already begun to light the candles."

Don Taddeo went back to the left of the high altar. " How bent he is ! " remarked Mama Paradisi ; and Signora Zampieri added :

" Any one would think he was climbing a mountain."

And on the steps of the Cipolla chapel, kneeling in the crowd, the light from the candles reflected in their wide open eyes, Fania and Nanà, the servant-girls, pressed their little black hands against their breasts.

" Do you see the cross ? He is carrying the cross. He is carrying the cross for us."

Now all the candles were lit and their flames shed a glow over the golden ground of the apse. Little Druso and Coccola swung their censers still higher, the clouds of incense became still denser and from their midst resounded the words of the gospel.

Blandini, Allebardi and young Mandolini pushed down the tailor. He tried to get to his wife, but she was sitting in the crowd behind and he had to remain in the vestibule. The people heard him pacing to and fro with uneven strides and hazarded conjectures what was wrong with him—and then a melody soared up, forceful and confident, as though from a single, unshackled breast.

" The credo ! Why, it's magnificent ! "

" It's out of '*Povera Tonietta*,' " declared Polli.

" Just fancy, I should never have given that young man credit for it."

And when it was over, in smothered voices, craning their necks :

"Bravo, maestro!"—while Don Taddeo in his gleaming embroidered vestments, bowed still more humbly over the altar, his hands groping upward.

"Come, Holy Ghost!"

He murmured as he washed his hands. He cried :

"*Orate fratres!*"

A swift crescendo from the choir :

"*Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!*"

And a restless, expectant silence. The women exchanged rapid whispers and a last commotion spread through the ranks of the men. . . . The bell tinkled.

With a loud rustling sound they all slid down from the pews, stonework and steps. They heard the clatter of old Signora Nonoggi's crutches as she knelt down. Signora Giocondi, who was snoring, got a nudge from her daughters and dipped hurriedly down. All their heads were bowed low as Don Taddeo raised the shining vessel. The little white circle in it looked away over the congregation like the broken eye of God, and by its side, dim with fatigue and sorrow, the eyes of the priest. A long silence, and then :

"Even to us sinners," he said in a faint voice ; and then with an effort, his arms extended as though on a cross : "*Pax Domini!*"—and as they all began to cough and push about the chairs and force their way out, the choir answered his prayer :

"But deliver us from evil."

Acquistapace, the chemist, was among the first to be pushed out of the door.

"What's the matter? What is there to cry about?" Polli asked him.

"Oh! How beautifully they play the Agnus

How moving and uplifting the mass was ! It was so long since I had been inside the place."

And seeing his wife in the crowd, he embraced her and pressed a hearty kiss first on her left cheek and then on her right. She said nothing.

"That's not the point," said Polli. "The point is the lawyer. We must fetch him."

He went up to Malagodi, the ropemaker, and Scarpetta.

"Isn't that so, gentlemen ? This is the moment to make peace. It's better for business—and after all we are human."

"Oh ! I've no objection," they replied. "For, as a result of the civil war, the peasants are keeping away this Sunday. That hits you, but it hits us too."

Achilles collected Crepalini, the baker, and his friends in front of the cathedral.

"Oh ! So you think that the lawyer will revenge himself on you ? You don't know him. The lawyer is a noble-hearted gentleman."

"I answer for my friend," said the chemist, "that he will renew your monopoly."

None the less the baker scratched his head and stole quietly away into the group of people who were congratulating the conductor. The latter was leaning against the cathedral ; his hot palms were pressed against the wall and his face wore a wan smile. "So I have uplifted them," he thought. "I have purged their passions so that they feel at peace. But I had to suffer when I composed my mass, to suffer because of Flora Garlinda."

As he said nothing, the crowd dispersed. The conductor was still leaning against the wall and smiling when suddenly Cavaliere Giordano, his face beaming goodwill, stretched out to him his hand with its diamond ring.

"Maestro, I have good news for you : it reached me by post yesterday evening, but I waited until after the success of your mass in order to be able to increase your happiness twofold. Maestro——"

With a light, ecstatic gesture, as though he were wielding a magic wand : "—you are appointed second orchestral conductor to the Mondì-Berlindi company and you are to go to Venice for the autumn season."

The conductor's smile turned to stupefaction. Cavaliere Giordano beckoned up those standing by as witnesses.

"Eh ? It is a well-merited distinction." For our maestro Dorlenghi not only has talent ; he has a sympathetic talent."

They agreed. Signora Camuzzi nudged Signora Paradisi : "Ah ! Signora Aida, we had just decided that our meditations had never been so pious as during the maestro's mass, and now he is going to leave us."

"That is only natural," said Flora Garlinda. Suddenly there were large pale half-circles under her eyes, which were very grave, although her lips parted as if about to smile. She raised the conductor's limp hand and shook it violently.

"It was easy to foresee that he would outstrip us all. I, whom you leave behind, bid you farewell, maestro. You should know that I helped you. For I spoke about the Mondì-Berlindi company to little Rina—you remember your sweetheart, Rina, the servant-girl, whom you handed over to Cavaliere Giordano."

The crowd tittered and old Zecchini burst out laughing. The conductor suddenly flung himself round ; they saw the back of his neck twitch violently as he pressed himself against the wall round the corner. Cavaliere Giordano went after him with outstretched hands.

"My dear Dorlenghi, how can a mistaken notion

on the part of these honest folk—— I assure you that only your exceptional talent——”

“Leave me alone, Cavaliere, it is just that the unmerited good fortune has been too much for my nerves. And nevertheless——”

Suddenly he flung out his arms distractedly, clutched his head and gave an agonised moan.

“—I have compromised you, my benefactor, and endangered your life !”

The Cavaliere began to sniff.

“What do you mean, my dear fellow? Explain yourself.”

The conductor pressed his hands to his temples and kept on repeating : “Oh ! Oh !”

Confused shouts came from the Square :

“We want peace ! We want the lawyer !”—and again and again Savezzo bellowed :

“If you send for him, I shall see to it that you are the first to taste his revenge !”

Cavaliere Giordano looked round uneasily.

“What have I to fear? Pray speak out.”

“The tailor . . .”

The conductor put his hand to his mouth and seemed to force out the words between his fingers :

“I was beside myself, I no longer knew how to reply to his insults. . . . Then I told him that you had deceived him with his wife.”

The old tenor tittered.

“Well ! And suppose it were true.”

“But the tailor is frantic with rage, he may kill you.”

The old man’s face fell ; he spread out his hand.

“It isn’t true ! I swear that it isn’t true. Possibly I made an attempt. I don’t deny that I——”

“We want the lawyer ! Let the gentlemen fetch him ! Hold your tongue, you mischief-maker !”

The conductor and Cavaliere Giordano wandered round and round, wringing their hands.

"Oh! These young people," wailed the old man. "They lose their heads all in a moment. Passions! Hot blood! A pretty business!"

"What have I done?" groaned the conductor. The old man came to a halt and his head shook with anger.

"But you owed me some consideration in return for my kindness! What you have done is base and vile!"

And the next moment, his knees trembling and his face puckered as though on the verge of tears: "He will kill me. Where can I hide now? Oh! I knew that I should meet my end here—in a town with less than a hundred thousand inhabitants and surrounded by mystery. It is that accursed invisible one who will destroy me by the hand of the tailor!"

Suddenly with his knees bent he began to run down the Corso, but he made little progress. Signora Camuzzi appeared at the corner.

"Cavaliere!"

She overtook him; she whispered:

"Not that way. The tailor is on that side."

And as he turned round with a groan:

"The Square is full of people. You will be safest there. It is well that you are leaving the town to-day."

"I shall never leave it."

"You must take precautions. I might conceal you in my house, but as the tailor knows where you are staying——"

"Save me!"

The old man clung to her arm. She only shook her head. Polli and Acquistapace forced their way out of the excited mob, which was surging in all directions over the Square, driven by its own passions.

"They are all agreed. We are going for the lawyer."

But Savezzo burst out ; " In vain ! He is arrested ; he is going to the galleys."

He tore from his breast a packet of soiled papers and wetted his finger :

" This is his confession ! He has confessed that he laid the fire."

The crowd recoiled—and suddenly plunged forward.

" Show us ! Where ? "

" It is false ! " thundered the chemist, snatching violently at the paper. He held it aloft. " The scoundrel has forged it. This man here is the scoundrel. Now you know whom you have to send to the galleys."

He raised his hand and faced the howling mob ; he stamped with his wooden leg and he shouted until the veins swelled on his forehead :

" Leave him alone ! Don't use violence ! Oh ! Admire the lawyer's clemency. He pardons all who attacked him ; he pardons even this man and gives him back his paper."

And with a grandiose gesture the old man handed it to Savezzo who squinted down his nose. The people clapped.

" Bravo ! Fetch the lawyer ! "

" The tailor," said Signora Camuzzi, " did not hear the maestro mention your name, did he Cavaliere ? He only knows that a tenor is with his wife. But there are two tenors here. Send the other one to her ! "

As he looked at her :

" Yes, send him to make your excuses to the tailor's wife. Let him give her a lesson instead of you, let him do what he thinks fit—but we will drop a hint to the tailor. Oh ! he will not stop to ask questions ; he will lose all power of reflection . . . "

" But that would be murder," said Cavaliere Giordano, taking a step backward. Signora Camuzzi shrugged her shoulders. " I give you advice because

you asked for it. Look, isn't that the tailor standing behind all those people near Lucia's alley and looking this way? What eyes he has!"

"Help! I will do what you say."

"Courage, Cavaliere! I will go and try to soften him. . . . Oh! he has disappeared. Where can he have gone? But now you are warned."

Mancafede, the merchant, tottered along behind Acquistapace and Polli.

"Don't go without me! Am I not the lawyer's most loyal supporter, who never doubted him for a moment?"

Signor Giocondi too strutted after them. .

"And I? For, you ought to remember, but for my conversation with Don Taddco, the lawyer would never have recovered his position."

They explained to him that at the present moment his diplomatic talents might be more usefully employed on the Square in order to keep the people in a good temper.

At the foot of the steep alley Savezzo once more flung himself across their path. He struck himself blindly with his fists and spluttered as he tried to speak.

"Cowards! Miserable cowards!" he howled. "Double-dyed traitors, who slink away in time of danger and, when the tide turns, creep back again. As for me, I shall perish, but I shall perish despising you."

With one more resounding thump on his chest he turned away.

They mounted the alley in silence. . . . The merchant turned to the chemist:

"You ought to have answered him. Why didn't you knock him down?"

After a pause Polli sighed:

"We seem to have lost our heads and to have talked of doing a great many things that we should never have done when it came to the point, At any rate I can say

for myself that I should have stuck to the lawyer even in adversity."

The chemist dropped his head and said not a word.

" . . . The lawyer's niece is standing at the window of his room," remarked Mancafede. The tobacconist surmised :

" No doubt he sought consolation in the bosom of his family. But he shall soon see that he has other friends as well."

And while they were still at a distance he began to whistle up at the house. The lawyer's niece turned away from the window.

" Lawyer, here are three gentlemen coming ! "

The lawyer was lying in bed. He shrugged his shoulders and kept his eyes closed. The widow Pastecaldi looked out.

" Thank heaven, they are friends."

" What's that, friends," and Galileo Belotti raised his eyebrows until they disappeared beneath his hair.

" There are no more friends. No doubt they are coming to tell the lawyer that he is to go to the galleys."

" You godless fellow ! Don't you see that the lawyer is ill ? You had better join all those other horrid people on the Square. Don't you agree, doctor ? "

Doctor Capitani, who was examining the lawyer's urine, agreed.

" You had better indeed, pappappapp. But what if the Square is dull without the lawyer."

And Galileo stumped noisily across the room.

" Galileo ! " shouted the tobacconist's voice from just beneath the house. " Tell the lawyer that we have come to arrest him."

The widow Pastecaldi put her hand to her cheek and screamed like a child.

" What did I say," said Galileo, puffing out his chest.

The lawyer made a convulsive movement ; the doctor hastened to support him.

" Even the most cruel destiny shall find me undismayed," said the lawyer, with a flourish of his trembling hand. " But I do not feel that I am lost ; for——"

He recovered his voice :

" —I believe in the justice of the people."

Then the door flew open. Polli shouted :

" Good day to you all. Is the great man at home ? "

And then he was suddenly struck dumb ; he took a step backwards.

" Signora Artemisia," whispered the lawyer, " what's the matter ? The lawyer doesn't look at us. Is he very ill ? "

As she only raised her clasped hands :

" Then we must go and tell the people they can't have him. For the people want him back."

" What ? Don't you want to arrest him ? " asked Galileo.

" Of course not ! Don't you understand that that was a joke ? " said Polli. The people are asking for you, lawyer."

" Here I am," said the lawyer, drawing out his legs from under the bedclothes. He pushed away the doctor—and then remained sitting there in his pants, too weak to move.

His sister rushed to his side.

" You will kill yourself, lawyer. Glory will be the death of you."

" What's that ? Glory ? "—and Galileo explained to the company :

" The lawyer has taken too many hot baths. Whenever one wants a meal he is sure to be needing the whole kitchen for his hot water. And then, of course, his office is always full of petticoats . . ."

His sister wailed ;

"I always told you, lawyer, that if you were in power, you would not be able to refuse anything to the women and they would ruin you. Now it has happened."

"For the lawyer," continued Galileo, "had an apoplectic fit in his bath this morning."

Suddenly the lawyer leapt to his feet and beat the air with his hands.

"What nonsense ! An apoplectic fit, a man like me ! Tell the gentlemen, doctor, that I am in splendid health !"

"It was only a slight weakness," declared the doctor ; "for, lawyer, it looks as though your sugar had got less again."

The chemist approached, stumping heavily, and took the lawyer's hand.

"My poor friend, you have suffered. We, the people, have caused you suffering. But now we want to have you back and to thank you. Come !"

"I am coming. I feel better already. My clothes ! Ah ! The people are calling for me. You, doctor, would have me ill, but the people would have me well, and they are stronger than you. I am well."

He embraced his friend, his sister and the doctor.

"Your face is already not so grey," said Doctor Capitani. "Your eyes are already brighter. Well, I resign you to the people—if you promise in future to take what I give you."

"More than that ! I will also take what you don't give me !"—and the lawyer gave him a friendly poke in the stomach and a smacking kiss on each of his large pink cheeks.

"What a dear fellow you are, doctor ! Oh ! How happy we all are ! But I realised that this was what would happen. Never did I lose my belief in the justice of the people !"

"Not those trousers !" cried Polli. "It's a great

occasion, and the lawyer must be dressed as though it were his wedding-day."

"Where is your new suit?" asked the widow Pastecaldi. "Why there, Galileo has found it."

Galileo blustered :

"If any one knows the lawyer's business, it's myself."

The widow fastened the lawyer's tie. Mancafede declared :

"When I sold you that tie, who could have foretold that you would wear it for such an occasion. For we have all triumphed. Don Taddeo has begged us all for mercy."

"That isn't true," said the chemist. "He implored us all to live at peace. God has made him reasonable, so that he now sees, lawyer, that you are a man of high deserts."

"And that he is one too," said the lawyer, "as I found out last night."

He let the doctor help him on with his coat and snatched up his hat.

"Let us go! Artemisia, come!"

She put up her hands to her rustic, tight-fitting bodice.

"How can I? The people will laugh at you if they see me by your side."

He answered :

"Never fear, the people will not want me to be different from themselves."

"The lawyer to the galleys?" said Amelia, who was standing at the window in her white muslin frock and rolling her eyes. They had to give her a poke in the ribs.

As they left the house, a shot was fired, and below the people began to shout.

"By Bacchus," said Polli. "They have even fetched the cannon from the Town Hall."

"I hope they won't do any damage," said the lawyer. "I shall have to go and see what they're up to."

"Oh!" cried the chemist, "don't you know that there are more important things to be done? Don Taddeo wants to give you the key to the bucket."

And as the lawyer stood there open-mouthed, Mancafede declared:

"You see how afraid he is of us."

The lawyer found his tongue:

"What? The court awarded him the bucket, and he wants— He's a fool!"

He stopped laughing and walked on.

"What I meant was that I should not have done that. It's clear that Don Taddeo has a rare soul."

He said nothing more until they reached the corner—and then they saw the Square with its black, murmuring crowds spread out below them, and in a moment eager hands were stretched out towards them and shouts rang out:

"There he is! There's the lawyer! Three cheers for the lawyer!"

He stopped on the last step of the alley; his companions retreated a few paces, and with a wide flourish he took off his hat to the cheering crowds. The shadow of the Town Hall fell across his upturned face, and yet it seemed to them that the sun was shining full upon it, relaxing the muscles, beautifying the tanned skin, chasing away the wrinkles and kindling it to a radiant effulgence.

"Never has the lawyer looked like that before," exclaimed the women. "He is beautiful!"

The men said to one another:

"We really ought to send the lawyer to parliament, so that the people in the capital may see what a great man we have."

"My dear friends," said the lawyer in a choking

voice, as he shook their hands. The chemist pushed his way forward : " Make way, gentlemen ! " and Lieutenant Cantinelli cleared the passage to the cathedral. As the lawyer entered it, he saw another figure pass along on the other side—Don Taddeo ! And above the cathedral hung the papal flag ! Then the bell began to peal from the tower and immediately a shot boomed from the other side. The lawyer swung round : from the Town Hall the national flag was waving.

" Three cheers for the lawyer ! " .

They would not let him go on until he had shaken all their hands ; and he, pale with happiness, hardly recognised their faces. Suddenly :

" Camuzzi ! Ah ! "

With a glance at the tricolour :

" My dear friend, Camuzzi ! "

" The hymn to Garibaldi ! " shouted the chemist. For in front of his house, behind the surging crowds, glittered the musical instruments. On the other side, mounted on a chair, Achilles was waving his flag.

" The hymn to Garibaldi ! " echoed the people. Signor Fiorio, the Sub-Prefect, arrived just in time to catch hold of the maestro's arm. He implored him to play the royal march.

The band struck up the march ; the people clapped ; the lawyer tore himself away from the crowd ; he saw approaching him the big, rusty key, which Don Taddeo was holding in front of him with both hands. Don Taddeo was pale as death ; his red, flashing eyes never swerved from the lawyer. If a woman stooped to kiss his cassock, he made a sudden movement, but otherwise, although not a hand touched him, he seemed to hold back his steps, as though he wanted to prolong this transit, to prolong it to the utmost. . . . The lawyer suddenly stretched out his hands and began to hurry.

His face was full of respect and he almost ran. So they met before Don Taddeo had reached the fountain. He held the key still further from himself ; the lawyer took it with a bow. Then they drew back slightly from one another. The people waited in silence. The lawyer coughed and Don Taddeo looked down at the ground. All at once he raised his eyes with a smile and the lawyer stretched out his arms. A burst of applause rose from the crowd as they fell upon each other's necks. On the cathedral the glistening white and yellow papal standard flapped its heavy folds. Above the seething tumult Achilles waved his white-red-green flag furiously to and fro in the blue air. Pipistrelli began to pull both bells ; he made them dance. The band broke into a quick march, puffing its music round the Square like some intoxicating breeze ; and then for the third time the cannon sounded. Don Taddeo and the lawyer were holding hands : "Long live the lawyer ! Long live Don Taddeo !"—and while they bowed to their respective sides they pressed each other's hands again and again as though each were assigning to the other the whole of the applause, just as the tenor and the prima donna had done in "*Povera Toniella*."

"Long live Don Taddeo !"

The women forgot their shyness and flung themselves upon him, pressing resounding kisses on his cheeks while he stood there with a red flush under his eyes and a flickering smile on his lips.

"Long live the lawyer !"

"My dear friends ! Here is the key to the bucket !"—and he drew himself up. "We have it back ; now we will show the bucket to the actors !"

"We will show the bucket to the actors !" cried the people. The lawyer pressed his finger to his lips and looked sideways at Don Taddeo. But Don Taddeo waved his hand and declared promptly that the actors

ought certainly to see it and that he would accompany them.

"Really, Reverendo?"—and the lawyer lifted his hat several times in succession.

"What a saint!" said the people; as Gaddi and Cavaliere Giordano were thrust forward. The lawyer presented them to the priest.

"The Cavaliere is a man famous all over the globe to whom mankind is ineffably indebted. And as for Singor Gaddi, he worked at the hose last night like one of ourselves. You indeed, Reverendo, who did more than any one——"

"Great sins demand great virtues," said Don Taddeo quickly, pressing his hand to his breast, "and I realise now that our deserts are one with our guilt."

"I quite agree," said the lawyer. "We can never do more than is owing from us, and the little good that it is my privilege to accomplish——"

With a flourish of his arm :

"——comes to me from the people."

The crowd clapped and pushed along the two men to the door of the tower. Neither wished to go in first ; they revolved round one another and were shoved in as they revolved. The people surged in after them. Another crowd streamed across the steps of the cathedral. From it Savezzo emerged, and stole unnoticed through the curtain and the vestibule. One solitary face glimmered out of the empty pews at the back.

"You here, Signor Savezzo?" asked Signora Camuzzi.

"Since you made me a sign——"

"I, a sign?"

Their voices echoed back from the pillars ; Signora Camuzzi whispered :

"You are mistaken. . . . But you are wearing your cloak and you are carrying a bundle?"

"Yes. For I am going away ; I am forsaking the

scene of my defeat. Better begin a new struggle in a strange place than live on here and witness the insolent triumph of my old enemy."

Smothered cheers sounded through the stillness.

"Do you hear?"—and he gnashed his teeth. He flung his hat on to the ground.

"Don't pick it up," said Signora Camuzzi, "we are in church. Since God himself is on the side of the lawyer, you won't alter things."

"I will alter them—after I have won victories out there in the world and have become great."

"I," said Signora Camuzzi with a faint sigh, "have a husband who is and will remain municipal secretary. Therefore I must needs end my life in the town and wait to see whether the saints are pleased to hear me."

"I shall plunge into the great world! What different interests and passions!"

"You think so?"—very softly with her head bent.

"You will hear of me. After I have achieved fame in the capital as a great journalist feared by all, I shall return, and the lawyer will see then who is sent to parliament. Ah! What a clean sweep I shall make in the town! How I shall trample the ruling families in the dust! I see the Square strewn with bankrupt corpses."

He squinted darkly and grimaced as he gnashed his teeth. Outside voices screamed:

"Back! For God's sake! We are being suffocated!"

The two exchanged glances.

"Apparently," said Signora Camuzzi slowly, "the tower, which is a little too small for such a great festival of general reconciliation, is saving you the trouble, Signor Savezzo, and destroying them for you."

The corners of her mouth trembled; her eyes flashed but she immediately lowered her lids. After a pause:

"So you are going by the diligence with the actors?"

He spread out the folds of his mantle.

"I am going on foot, as becometh a poor and austere conqueror, and in those very shoes which were torn to pieces by a hostile mob."

"Then it will be so much easier for you to drop a word to someone on your way . . . to Alba Nardini in Villascuro ; tell her that the tenor will keep her waiting, that he is detained by the wife of Chiaralunzi, the tailor.

He pulled his cloak round his arms and crossed them. He looked up at her searchingly :

"How have you managed that ?"

"The saints ! It is the work of the saints. . . . Perhaps it was my prayer that moved them ? In any case the interests of heaven, whose bride poor Alba is, are at stake—and now that all have been converted to peace and harmony, should not we too do a little good ?"

"So this one tenor has injured you more deeply than the whole town has injured me ?"

As her face darkened :

"Oh, never mind ! I know nothing and I shall do as you wish. As for the consequences, what do I care ? I am a stranger who drops a word as he passes by. If only it could destroy the whole town !"

He flung back the end of his cloak so violently that it flew round over the other shoulder.

"Farewell until I return as conqueror !"

And his footsteps echoed noisily as he strode away. As the curtain fell back behind him, Signora Camuzzi shrugged her shoulders lightly.

Outside, voices shouted :

"Savezzo !"

The residue of the populace who had been unable to force their way into the tower thronged the steps of the cathedral.

"Look at that hideous monkey ! It was he who

egged us on to civil war. Probably he set fire to the inn as well? Seize him!"

Savezzo buried his chin in his cloak. With his hat pulled over his eyes and his shoulders thrust forward, he rushed violently down the steps, forced his way through the crowd and strode off.

"Hohoho!" exclaimed those he had flung out of his path, and they rubbed their sides. Savezzo disappeared into the street by the Town Hall. A woman said:

"He too wants to live, poor fellow; and maybe he has a hard journey before him."

"Here comes Signorina Italia. Make haste, Signorina. The lawyer is showing the bucket to you actors. Why didn't you come earlier?"

Italia had had to mend her dress. All her others had been ruined by the fire and the water.

"What?" cried Signora Druso and Pomponia, the servant-girl, "are you to leave the town worse off than when you came to it? Surely that can't be allowed, Signora Aida?"

"Room for Signorina Italia!"—and stout old Corvi took her by the hand and forced a passage for her into the tower. His paunch shoved the people against the wall to left and right and at every step voices exclaimed:

"Ah! Signorina Italia, she only just escaped thanks to Don Taddeo. . . . I'm so glad to see you well again, Signorina. . . . Don Taddeo is upstairs in the room where the bucket is. The lawyer has been asking for you."

They heard his voice. As Italia appeared on the threshold, he broke off.

"Come in, Signorina, the bucket is awaiting you, for three hundred years it has been awaiting this hour. Look at it, Signorina, take a good look at it!"

Italia looked up where it hung, with its mouldering

strips of wood gaping apart and only kept from falling by iron rings ; and then she looked questioningly at the faces of the others. Don Taddeo, his hands clasped, was gazing through the window into the empty air. Flora Garlinda's mouth was twisted in a grimace and Cavaliere Giordano had drawn out a pocket-mirror. Behind the crowd she saw Nello Gennari rocking with laughter like a boy ; Gaddi had to hold him. Then Italia summoned up her courage :

"One couldn't draw any water with that bucket," she said.

"But one can draw a lesson with it," retorted the lawyer promptly. "This bucket, poor, worn-out object as it may appear, teaches us none the less," and the lawyer raised his voice, "to believe in human progress !"

He made a movement with his arms as though to draw in those who were craning their necks over the threshold of the densely packed room.

"For when we captured it the first time, it was by dint of a great and savage war, in which the people of Adorna had to shed enough blood to fill the bucket. But this time no one has perished. We are all victors, since each has vanquished himself and is resolved to compete with his fellows only for the palm of virtue !"

With a radiant smile he waited for the applause to subside.

"But you, Signorina Italia, must embrace your rescuer as we all embrace him ; for it was not only you he rescued."

"Where is Don Taddeo ?"

In vain they searched through the crowd. On the staircase someone called out : "He is below in the Square !"

He was just drawing the bolt of the door to the platform above. He slipped out and pressed back the

door with both hands, trembling with fierce resentment :
 " Go ! Why do you continue to torture me ! Have I not made sufficient sacrifice ? "

No one heard him. The lawyer reached the Square, swept along by the crowd. Even when he stumbled he never lost his ecstatic smile and all the time he waved the key to the bucket high above the surging throng.

" The lawyer ought to hang it round his neck ! " demanded the people ; and they looked for something on which to fasten it.

" That ribbon in your hair would do," said Doctor Capitani to his wife, and with crimson cheeks she took it from her head and drew it through the key. As she fastened it round his neck, the lawyer said :

" You know what I think : that all our glory would be in vain but for the reward from our women ! "

The women clapped. The lawyer kissed Iole Capitani's hand and whispered to her :

" Your love has sustained me."

And he believed it—well as he knew that the night before, when all had disowned him, his beloved had been no stronger than the rest. He pressed their hands as they approached, and when he saw them hesitate as though held back by an uneasy conscience, he drew them towards him.

" Oh ! Scarpetta, those supplies for the Town Hall were not burnt last night. . . . What, Malagodi ! It was all a mistake, and at bottom we never forgot that we belonged to each other. . . . They tell me, Crepalini, that you had fears for your contract ? What a strange notion. On the contrary, when the actors come next time I shall ask you for a modest seat in your box, for the one that was mine will then be yours."

His eyes lighted on the chemist :

" And you, friend Romolo ? I think we may say that we have deserved these tears of joy."

They embraced. The old soldier stammered out as he clung round his friend's neck :

"I may go to hell, but one thing I know : I shall never hang myself—since I didn't do it this morning."

The lawyer pressed him closer—but then, as he was drawing out his handkerchief, he found another pair of arms round his neck, and then another and yet another. Cheap powder flew up his nostrils, feathers tickled him ; shrill little voices, snub little chalk-white noses and gay little flags whirled round him.

"You are the handsomest man in the town, lawyer, with your key on the blue ribbon. . . . How glad I am that you are well again. . . . We shall never forget our director. . . . No one else will ever give us such advances."

The lawyer struggled. He peered round for Iole Capitani.

"Be good, children," he murmured. The little chorus girls burst out laughing all at once and fluttered away. The young men in large hats and fancy neckties caught hold of them.

"All over here !" shouted a voice from the *Café Progresso*. "The gentlemen are going to pay."

"You will be paid for here, too !" shouted the baker from the *Café Sant' Agapito*. He added :

"But only one glass, and you were here before."

The crowd surged more rapidly across the Square. Their faces were brighter, their voices louder. Mama Paradisi and her daughters, Signora Camuzzi and the Giocondi ladies emerged from their houses freshly powdered. The people said :

"Who would believe that we have been on our feet all night."

"Harmony and liberality are beautiful things !" declared Signor Giocondi. "Even Signor Salvatori has raised his workmen's wages."

"Nothing of the sort!" shouted Signor Salvatori. "Signor Giocondi wants to ruin me because his factory now belongs to me."

But it was no use; already he was surrounded; his workmen had hurried up, and he was praised and congratulated until he wept for pride and treated his workmen to wine into the bargain.

"And for twenty years he has been called a skinflint," said Signora Camuzzi in a soft whisper. "How many prejudices we poor ignorant creatures must lay aside. I for my part look upon an actress as my equal."

She embraced Italia and the people clapped. Fania and Nanà, the servant-girls, shouted that the poor actress had lost all her clothes in the fire. There was an outburst of sympathy! Signora Nonoggi promptly produced a winter jacket, Signora Acquistapace a skirt—"May it bring you luck; I have worn it oftener in church than in the theatre"—and Mama Paradisi began to draw the pins out of her enormous new hat. Her hands trembled as she did so, but although they all protested that it was the pride of the town, she insisted on making the sacrifice until Italia fell weeping into her arms.

"How kind we all are!" said Signora Camuzzi.

"Hi! Friend Giovaccone!" shouted Achilles, forcing his way through. "I saw that fool of a Savezzo upset a bottle of your Strega liqueur, and I dare say it was your last. In a business like mine we have several, so here's one of them to help you out. People should be reasonable, the town can provide a living for us both."

"All happy!"—and Signor Giocondi pinched his wife's cheek so that she gave a tired smile. "Our daughters will get husbands, for in my memorable conversation with Don Taddeo he promised to find them. Eh! What do you say to your father, who thinks only of you?"

He put out his lips, and Cesira pressed a kiss upon them with a smothered cry of joy. As for the jilted Rosina, her eyes were shining and tender and she thought :

“ Is there a chance of happiness after all ? ”

“ All this is so beautiful because Alba and I are happy,” said Nello to himself, as he wandered about, alone and tireless, among the sun-bathed crowd. How thrilling it all was and as easy as a dream ! A wish, and it was granted. “ I could not think where to hide myself when the others went away, and now the Cavaliere tells me about the tailor ! It is as though God had sent him or as though he came from Alba herself. But I knew well that men could not remain ill-natured as they were last night, that they would perforce become as happy as ourselves. Now they all wish me well. . . .”

And he shot thankful glances towards the two Paradisi girls who had once fought over him and were now making play with their fans for his benefit. Nina Zampieri, when she passed near Nello, clung tighter to the arm of her betrothed, young Mandolini, and cast down her eyes as though she now remembered with shame her claps of approval on the night of the young singer's downfall.

Bonometti, the barber, was all over the place. With his head enveloped in a large handkerchief, he stared proudly at everyone and cried : “ The lawyer is a great man ! ”

Many of them looked away or disappeared, but Nello Gennari stopped him.

“ You have won your cause, Signor Bonometti, and those who ill-treated you now fear you. But as they are all making friends, should not you too be merciful ? ”

Nello smiled tenderly and reflected : “ What a

beautiful thought ! Did I think of it myself ? It is Alba who thinks through me—It is Alba ! ” He added :

“ And by so doing you will help the lawyer.”

“ You are right ! ”—and Bonometti tore off his handkerchief and flung it in the air.

“ Long live the lawyer ! ”

They all echoed the shout and the lawyer bowed. Suddenly he rushed towards the two Signorine Pernici, who had not joined in the shouting and were pulling long faces.

“ What ? There are still some of our womenfolk who are not contented ? I know, ladies, that you have suffered losses. I might reply that there was no need for you to go among the crowd with your feather hats over your arm. Fear obscured the image of realities in your minds as in the minds of us all. Moreover, there was no steam engine. That is the truth and I shall never deny it : there was no steam engine and therefore, oh ladies——”

He waved his arm above the circle of listeners.

“ —since Don Taddeo is paying Malandrini for his house : the ladies call me their friend and they shall not find themselves mistaken : I will pay you for your millinery.”

The crowd clapped frantically, and the lawyer, his breast puffed out beneath the great, rusty key, pursued his search.

“ Gaddi ! ”—he stretched out his hands. “ You who last night excelled us all in civic virtue, do you really wish to leave us ? It will grieve us to lose you.”

“ That is how matters stand,” replied the baritone, “ and how can it be helped ? ”

“ Oh ! But if we kept you here ? I shall speak to our municipal secretary ; he is a dear friend of mine, and I am sure he will find you a post as manager in one

of our offices. You are the father of a family, Gaddi, and a man of worth. What? No more travelling from place to place, no more cares ! ”

Gaddi said :

“ That is worth considering. . . . And yet no. I thank you, lawyer. There would be no more tiresome journeys in local trains, and the future would be more secure, that’s true. But would one have such friends ? And would one then as now, however mediocre one’s talents as a singer, sometimes feel the great things that life has to give ? ”

“ Oh ! Other people too feel them. . . . You prefer not ? It’s a pity, for you deserve to be one of us. ”

And then he noticed Cavaliere Giordano :

“ You at least, Cavaliere, will remain with us, on a marble tablet. Your great name will never leave the town ! ”

The old tenor showed signs of excitement.

“ So my memorial tablet has not been rejected ? ”

“ Rejected or no, the municipal council will be happy to see its error made good. By Bacchus, I won’t suggest a tablet on the Town Hall again. One must act as a statesman and take account of human foibles—a man like yourself, Cavaliere, will understand me. But—hi ! Malandrini ! ”

He fetched up the innkeeper.

“ You, Malandrini, whose house Don Taddeo is to rebuild, will not refuse to place upon it at your own expense a memorial tablet to your most famous guest. ”

“ But he wasn’t my guest, ” said Malandrini.

“ I wasn’t his guest, ” said Cavaliere Giordano. The lawyer gesticulated.

“ What matter ! Should a great plan be frustrated by such a trifle ? Posterity, Cavaliere, will admire your glory, wherever they find it. ”

"I don't say no," declared the innkeeper. "Perhaps the English will come to read the inscription."

"What a rare genius you are!"—and the old singer flung his arms round the lawyer's neck.

But the crowd began to surge towards the steep alley. At the corner stood the diligence and Masetti, the driver, mounted on his seat and purple in the face, was shouting angrily.

"They're not going! The actors are going to stay here!" ordered the crowd.

The lawyer hurried across; he suggested that before the departure of the actors they should all breakfast on the Square. In vain Masetti protested that it was ten o'clock; that he had already waited until the end of the mass——

"Down with you!" shouted the crowd and they hauled him from his box. In a moment the tables from the two cafés had been spread across the Square so that they met beneath the arcade of the Town Hall. They were laid and the women brought out their crockery. Mama Paradisi herself bore along her gigantic soup tureen, Serafini, the grocer, brought sausages, and the widow Pastecaldi was back in a trice with her famous oil cakes. Old Zecchini and his boon-companions gave Mancafedé, the merchant, no peace until he contributed some of his wine. Polli had loaded his wife, Olindo, and his yellow-haired daughter-in-law with cigars.

"Oh! On such a day as this a man must fetch his wife out of the shop and put up the shutters."

The poor people soaked their bread in oil in the shade of the houses. Coletto jingled along with his wagon of pastries, at the same time mimicking Pipistrelli at his prayers, and the girls walked round the wagon, swinging their fans and ogling, waiting for someone to offer them something.

"Come along, Corvi ! There is food here even for those who have nothing."

Signora Zampieri, Nina and young Mandolini ate nothing and distributed their supplies among a large circle of children, while the journeymen and the servant-girls fetched Lucia out of her alley.

"She shall sit next to the lawyer ! Lucia next to the lawyer !"

The lawyer received her with a bow.

"What nonsense ! That was a joke. Don Taddeo must sit next to the lawyer. Where is he ?"

"Well ?" shouted Galileo Belotti, planting himself in front of the little hunchbacked clerk from Spello, who was trying to escape into the street by the Town Hall. "Wasn't I right ? You are hunch——"

He swallowed down the word.

"But none the less we are all equal."

And he walked with him to the table arm in arm.

"Don Taddeo is not to be found ! We have searched the whole town !"

The deuce ! Had something happened to him ? What nonsense ! No doubt he was sleeping, and they ought to leave him in peace, for he had worn himself out more than any of them. A health to the saint !

Instead of Lucia, the poultry-woman, the lawyer, with a beaming face strutted up to Iole Capitani and led her to the place of honour beneath the arch ; on his other side he placed Cavaliere Giordano. But he was not allowed to sit down.

"Chiaralunzi wants to go away because the maestro is sitting near him !"

The lawyer interposed.

"Two such men as you ! Who would have believed that you could disturb this civic festival. Since you have made peace with your wife, Chiaralunzi——"

For his wife was smiling, though her eyes were swollen.

The maestro had slandered her, repeated the tailor stubbornly, and now he was his enemy. The lawyer maintained that the maestro had only wanted to say something witty.

"You know very well, Chiaralunzi, that there is something comic in a wife deceiving her husband."

The conductor spread out his hands.

"Regard me as a mischief-maker, although I was only angry—but never again believe, oh, never again believe that I spoke the truth ! How could I endure the thought that I had made you unhappy when I myself am now so happy."

He sobbed ; they could scarcely understand what he said. The lawyer asked in a voice trembling with emotion :

"Can you doubt ?"

A flush spread slowly over the tailor's cheeks, he snorted uneasily—and suddenly he grabbed at the other's hand. The lawyer clapped approvingly.

"So you don't hate each other any more."

"Did we really hate each other ?" said the conductor. "It was like another person's hatred which we picked up by chance, and did not trouble to throw away. It seems that our hatred is born of our pride ; because a man has done wrong, he does a still greater wrong. But the greatest wrong is done to one's self. How could I write my opera !"

To the lawyer :

"For you have no idea how good a man must be in order to create."

"There's no need to tell me that," replied the lawyer.

Behind, in the corner near the steep alley, Flora Garlinda leant back and surveyed the feasting, chattering crowd, with their careless laughter and their peace-

making. . . . "What contemptible humbug! As though one had anything save one's self. Kindness? Nothing great is kind. Don Taddeo made a mistake when he came down to their level, and he will find it out. . . . We are not framed for comradeship. . . . And yet the path has been smoothed for that innocent fellow yonder; he is going to the Mondì-Berlendi Company, while I shall go on singing to peasants. It has turned out otherwise than I thought. My lot will be harder than his? For all my readiness and although I lead such a hard life?"

"Listen, Signorina!" cried Zecchini and the toppers, "you must sing us something. Here is wine to strengthen you. Come along!"

"Flora!" said Italia, who was seated opposite her, and she turned round as far as the attentions of young Severino Salvatori allowed her, for he was trying to kiss her. "Flora, they are calling you! . . . Oh, she doesn't hear. That girl thinks too much, and that is why she already has wrinkles like an old woman."

The prima donna gazed in front of her with eyes that were strangely deep and fixed and that immediately passed beyond what they had seen.

"He is lovable. And he seems lovable to them because he puts himself on their level, because he makes himself agreeable and opens out his heart to them. But in order to be great one must hold one's heart very tightly. . . . To-day he is handing over his sweetheart to that old man and accepting his reward. To-morrow he will sell his music to the people. No he has not outstripped me, and it may be that to-day is the beginning of his decline. Let him enjoy a little longer the cheerful sympathy of the streets—before the great art that I worship passes over them."

Someone pushed her chair. Under the table the boys

were crawling about on all fours snapping up tit-bits like dogs. The white-aproned cook from the *Promessi Sposi* arrived with a gigantic kettle, and they all made a dash for it. Cavaliere Giordano shouted for Nello Gennari. Signora Camuzzi held him back.

"I fancy, Cavaliere, that you are about to do something foolish. You want to tell that young man not to go to the tailor's."

"They have made friends! I am saved, do you understand, saved"—and the old man leapt up. "The Invisible One is frustrated; I am not going to die for a long time yet!"

"I will pray for you," said Signora Camuzzi. "But for all that the tailor is cuckolded. What? A man of your experience fails to see how matters stand? The tailor's wife and Gennari have known each other a long time."

As the old man recoiled:

"Consider the facts! The one tenor was confused with the other and the suspicion thrown on you, Cavaliere. Is it surprising that you should be regarded as the conqueror of women?"

Signora Camuzzi sighed. The old man turned his head anxiously.

"He must not visit the tailor's wife again," he wailed. "If the tailor becomes suspicious a second time, he will slay me without more ado. Oh! What a complicated business! Nello!"

Signora Camuzzi seized his hands firmly.

"Be quiet! Be quiet!" she whispered, and her lips were parted in a grimace in her pale little face. Suddenly he stopped shouting and surveyed her from between his half-closed lids. Immediately she loosed her hold of him and dropped her eyes.

"How you torture me!" she murmured. "All this time I have been betraying to you my jealousy of the

tailor's wife, but you, you cruel man, refuse to understand."

In a moment the old man's expression was all gracious tenderness.

"Calm yourself, it was only my overpowering love for yourself that blinded me to everything else."

She glanced swiftly round from beneath her eyelids. Her husband was gesticulating by the side of the lawyer. Polli, Crepalini, Malagodi, the chemist, the gentlemen and the middle classes were engaged in noisy demonstrations of mutual affection.

"Now you know, cruel one. You are beloved."

"Dear lady! What ardour consumes me!"

She looked up. The old man trembled.

"If you don't want to think of the others any more but only of me—Go home and I will follow you."

Through the raucous singing of the revellers could be heard the thin, piping voice of Mancafede, the merchant.

"Pray drink! It is my wine and it will cost you nothing. If the wine cost nothing, the madonna herself would drink to excess. But this glass you shan't have."

And he gulped it down. His hollow cheeks were flushed and his eyes with their overhanging brows shone like glass. Old Zecchini slapped him on the back and asked him whether his daughter had prophesied that he would be drunk in broad daylight.

"Oh!" said the merchant. "If she didn't know it already, she will know it before very long."

"But the disaster?" asked Gaddi, the baritone. "Your daughter prophesied that a disaster would happen while we artists were here. We leave to-day, but where is the disaster? Is it still to come?"

"Why should it be still to come? Isn't it a sufficient disaster that I have to give you my wine?"

And the merchant began to titter. He bent himself double and turned blue in the face. They pushed back their chairs.

"To think that we should see you in this state, Mancafede!"

"Listen! I'm going to tell you something."

And when he got sufficient breath:

"My daughter is—is a——"

A hiccough interrupted him. With a trembling hand the merchant made a long nose at the closed shutters of his house. A horrified murmur arose. The toppers set up a roar.

"Quiet there!" called someone. "The tenor is singing."

For Nello was standing on a table with his head thrown back and singing up into the blue sky:

"See, beloved, see our flower-decked house——"

They all crowded together beneath the arches of the Town Hall in the narrow shade of the awnings, and only the white face of the tenor was tilted back so that the tips of his eyelashes pointed straight towards the sun, and as his head shook with the passion of the music, a lock of dark glossy hair fell on to his forehead.

"Always 'Poor Tonietta'," said Signor Giocondi. "Evidently these young people know nothing else."

"Never mind," said Polli, caressing his daughter-in-law. "Now that this young lady is to be a member of the family, she shall often sing 'Poor Tonietta' in the evening to the accompaniment of the gramophone, and we will invite our friends."

"We know nothing of shadow or death. Our sky is clear, our happiness eternal," finished Nello, and his high note lingered on and on. . . . Finally, they all

held their breath and stood transfixed, almost terrified ; as though the heavens had been cleft by the imperishable cry of an immortal, of a statue glowing with superhuman life.

Suddenly he leapt down.

"What a splendid young man ! We shall never forget him."

They all clutched at him. Mama Paradisi swayed with emotion ; she kissed him loudly on both cheeks. As he emerged from beneath the black cloud of her hat, Gaddi drew him inside the gate of the post office.

"I too, my Nello, must now take leave of you. I will not warn you any more . . ."

As Nello waved his hand :

"I know it would be idle. And also I know of no good reason why I should be afraid for you. But I am afraid. I have a feeling that you are caught in a snare. Escape from it ! Come with us ! No, I know that you can't, and I should hold my tongue. But I see glances shot at you, and I am unusually quick of hearing ; I know that it all sounds womanish and ridiculous."

"You are not ridiculous, Virginio, you are my friend. No one else in the world wishes me as well as you do. Alba—oh ! that is more than human."

"The fact is," said Gaddi, "that you are the last friend of my youth. As long as I see you young—when we made friends I too was still almost young. Do you remember that evening by the sea, at Sinigaglia ? We had nothing to eat and we pulled mussels off the posts. We spent the night in a sand-pit where we found a girl ; we shared her between us. Those times are past."

Nello gave a ringing laugh.

"Yes, they are past. But more and more beautiful times are coming."

"Well, good-bye, then"—and Gaddi held him in a long embrace. "Farewell, my brother!"

Crepalini, the baker, was wrangling with Corvi, who was still eating. That was never intended, and he ought not to eat the whole town bankrupt because he was bankrupt himself. The stout old man blinked quietly and declared:

"I am eating because the lawyer is a great man. For a long time we did not know what to believe or whom to stand up for. Now, thanks be to God, I have an appetite again. Three cheers for the lawyer, and three cheers for liberty!"

"For the lawyer," said Acquistapace, the chemist, "is what you will not find again, a great man who loves liberty."

The baker snarled:

"He loves liberty, he loves liberty. But not until we had taught him to love it by showing our teeth. Liberty is a good thing, and consequently people should be very careful that no one takes too much of it."

"Bravo, lawyer!" they all shouted, for the lawyer was clambering on to the table in the sun. He stretched out his hand and raised his eyebrows very high until there was silence.

"Fellow-citizens! Our artists are leaving us!" he panted, and already they began to clap. He repeated, wagging his upraised finger:

"They are leaving us; but they leave us other than they found us. We have had——" and he raised himself on tip-toe, "we have had great experiences. . . . Wait a moment, Masetti!"

For the driver had come to the limits of his patience. He clattered with his vehicle out of the gate of the post office and threatened to overturn anything and any one that blocked his path.

"You too, Masetti," shouted the lawyer with outstretched arm, "have still to learn that the will of all is more worthy of respect than the will of one though he plead all the laws and regulations in his justification!"

He turned back to the people.

"And more evil and more good have disturbed our hearts and our streets in the last few weeks than ordinarily disturb them in the course of years."

"Quite true!"

"What are we? A little town. What did these guests bring us? A little music. And yet—"

The lawyer flung out his arms.

"—we have felt enthusiasm, we have striven, and we have made a little progress in the school of humanity!"

He placed his hands before his breast and his eyes beamed down on the applauding crowd. Then, with great fervour and flourishing his hands in the air:

"Therefore three cheers for the actors and three cheers for the town."

They all wanted to help him down and they all shouted: "Three cheers!"—meanwhile the tables had already been moved away, and the housewives rescued their crockery before Masetti drove through.

"What are you crying for?" asked Galileo Belotti of his sister, the widow Pastecaldi, giving her a dig in the ribs. "Can any other family boast that it has such a buffoon as ours. What is there to cry about?"

But he himself opened his eyes very wide to prevent the tears from flowing.

Masetti cracked his whip, and the actors hurried out of the streets. Malandrini, the innkeeper, pressed the hands of his guests, Signorina Italia and Signor Nello Gennari, and he apologised for the disturbance of their

last night's rest. Flora Garlinda, the prima donna, with her hands in the pockets of her cloak, came out of Lucia's alley, and, as on her arrival, the tailor, Chiraralunzi, bore her little trunk aloft upon his shoulders. Cavaliere Giordano took gracious leave of them all, flashing his diamond in all directions. And the swarm of little chorus-girls fluttered out of every nook and cranny of the town, with their light blouses, dyed hair and painted faces, like exotic insects startled and blown thither no one knew whence, shedding the dust from the iridescent wings along the ancient houses for the last time before they were blown away again no one knew whither.

They were to climb on to the luggage break ; Gaddi, the baritone, superintended the loading and helped up his own family ; and meanwhile the chorus-girls had to swear eternal fidelity to the young men who were carrying their bundles. Renzo, the assistant of Bonometti, the barber, would not be parted from his little sweetheart ; he wanted to stay with her and be a singer ; he tried to show off his tenor voice but was so agitated that he could not get out a note. His friends consoled him ; he could go with her a part of the way ; they too were coming ; and they fetched their bicycles.

"We are all coming !"—and the people forced Masetti, who wanted to drive off at full speed, to go at a walking pace. Hardly had he reached the street by the Town Hall when he had to pull up : Nello Gennari called out to his friend, Gaddi, that he too wanted to travel in the luggage break, and he got out.

Masetti shouted at the horses, and then Baron Torroni, equipped for hunting, came running after them. Polli, Acquistapace, Mancafede and Signor Giocondi also wanted to get in. Italia continued to sob.

"And the lawyer ?" she asked, waving her handkerchief and moaning.

Flora Garlinda, the prima donna, once more stretched her hand out of the window to Chiaralunzi, the tailor, who stood there stockstill gazing at her. He dashed forward with a sudden look of consternation, but the coach had already rolled on again and he could not reach the hand. He stumbled and they all laughed, but Flora Garlinda gravely took from her breast a dusty little artificial rose and flung it at the tailor.

Dorlenghi, the conductor, had turned away and was gazing down at the ground. They insisted that he should march out with the whole band, but at that he began to fling his arms about: "You expect me to march along behind these third-rate actors? I who am going to conduct grand opera in Venice?"—and suddenly he burst into tears. The people said nothing but made way for him and he escaped.

"Come along! After them all of you!"—and as the diligence drove through the gate the whole street by the Town Hall was already swarming with people. The young men with the large hats and fancy neckties stepped out briskly and overtook the coach, the gay, tinkling music of their mandolins heading the procession. In the midst of it young Severino Salvatori's horse ambled along, the light basket carriage swaying between its two large wheels, and oh! what a fine gentleman! He had let them get in—the carriage was packed to overflowing with a gay, buzzing swarm of little chorus-girls. They were sitting on top of one another, they were clinging round young Salvatori's neck; as he squatted on his low box-seat they took his monocle from his eye and put it back again, and all the while he preserved his air of elegant composure. In front of them Chiaralunzi and his friends were blowing into their instruments for all they were worth, and in the rear Nonoggi, the barber, and his band retorted by doubling their exertions.

The ladies in the roomy landau belonging to the landlord of the *Promessi Sposi* looked quite dazed—yet they declared that they wanted to go along as far as Spello. Oh ! it was all very well for them, but the people round had to fight for their lives, because Cimabue, the butcher, who was seated on his cart with his friends, was determined at all costs to get in front. Serafini, the grocer, said to his wife :

“ Surely you don’t imagine that he’s taking them for a joy-ride ? He means to smuggle in a calf on the way back, for the customs house officials have come along with the rest.”

She replied : “ In that case we too might fetch the grapes from Rufini.”

And they ran back to fetch the cart. More and more people were coming. The men carried the children ; the women fanned themselves, clattering along on their high heels ; “ Good day, Sora Anna,” cried one, “ we are escorting the actors to Spello. What a glorious day ! ” They disappeared in a cloud of dust. The late-comers hurried after them.

“ There’s not a living soul left in the town. Those who couldn’t walk have found their legs again. Just look ! Signora Nonoggi is pushing along her mother-in-law in a wheelbarrow. We must help her.”

As they reached the laundry a clatter of hoofs sounded behind them.

“ Why, it’s the blacksmith’s big white horse ; but who’s sitting on it ? . . . By Bacchus, the lawyer ! Good day to you, lawyer ! ”

The lawyer doffed his straw hat to them, swaying on his broad-backed steed.

“ May I ? ” he asked the people.

“ May you, indeed ! ” they answered. “ You’re not like the butcher. On with you, lawyer, you should be in front.”

"The lawyer in front!"—and they made way. With his mouth a little open from the exertion, but smiling triumphantly, the lawyer rode through.

"And there's Galileo! Long live Galileo's donkey!"

"Of course it'll live!" blustered Galileo from under his bell-shaped straw hat, and peering out sternly from above his blue glasses, he trotted swiftly after the lawyer on his little brown donkey.

"The lawyer is a great man," he declared, "but we too are not men of straw."

The lawyer, twisting in his saddle, bowed to the ladies in the landau.

"What a beautiful day! What a picture of civic harmony, fruitfulness and greatness!" and with his right hand he made a gesture that embraced the town, the fields and the populace. And then he asked after Gennari, the tenor. His friend on the luggage-break knew nothing about him. He was said to have got out of the diligence.

"But he got in again," declared Signora Camuzzi.

"Did you see him?"

"Everybody saw him, didn't they?" and she turned to the other ladies.

The lawyer gracefully drew himself up for the benefit of Iole Capitani before once more urging his white horse into a trot. All the people beamed as he rode past, and when Galileo followed on his donkey the children began to clap.

"But—Gennari?" shouted the lawyer as soon as he reached the diligence. "So you haven't got him there, Masetti? Do you realise that we are responsible for our guests?"

"Set your mind at rest, lawyer," said Cavaliere Giordano, beckoning him to the window. "The business that detains him is of a pleasant nature."

He whispered and the lawyer smirked.

"Oh ! You artists. I might have guessed it. Gallant adventures up to the last moment ! But of the loveliest of them all—that is our revenge—not one of you has had a glimpse. For she seldom quits her shady seclusion. . . ."

And he pointed to the dark garden the chill air of which seemed to grip them as they passed. It pressed upon their shoulders, it had the death-like odour of ancient cypresses ; they turned their heads with a shudder and until they had passed the bend of the road and were once more in sunlight they were silent. Then the lawyer said :

"Yonder dwell the only persons who have not troubled their heads about you. They don't trouble their heads about us for that matter. It is amazing, but people exist with whom the town counts for nothing—fanatics, who hold themselves aloof from the great concerns of humanity. A narrow garden and then death—that is all."

And a little further on :

"But the air of the place is heavy. This very spot where now they dwell beneath the shadow of the convent was once occupied by the houses of those courtesans who were the priestesses of Venus, and sometimes even shed their blood upon the altar of the goddess."

He tried to make his voice heard above the music, for on the other side of the garden Chiaralunzi and his comrades were throwing all their energies into a new melody, and the barber's band was determined not to be outdone. It was the wedding march from "Poor Tonietta," and the crowd all sang it, rather faintly and timidly as long as they were in the dark bend and more lustily as soon as they had passed it. And when the bicycles and the mandolins, the diligence, the

lawyer, Galileo and the people, the two bands, the basket-carriage full of chorus-girls and the people, the ladies in the landau, the butcher's cart, the luggage-break with Gaddi and the male chorus, the people round and the people behind, down to the children who were dragging along through the dust still smaller children, down to a pair of stragglers, down to old Signora Nonoggi on the wheelbarrow—when they had all passed through the cool shade of Villascura into the light, then something stirred in the shadow and a face gleamed through it.

Alba held the railing behind her with her hand, drew the veil more tightly round her head and bending forward she peered out. . . . The dust raised by the crowd still hovered in the air. She shuddered and began to run. She ran towards the town, awkwardly, as though forcing her way through a crowd; her breath came in pants through her anxiously parted lips—and all the time her hand clutched convulsively at her breast beneath the close folds of the veil.

Suddenly a clump of blood-red mountain ash stood just before her; she recoiled a step and gazed in horror at the empty dust of the road, as though something horrible were lying across it—and then, flinging her hands before her face, she reeled on to a stone.

She raised her head. The last strains of the music drifted towards her, faint, blurred and broken, and a bell tinkled from a chapel in the fields. It seemed to her that all these sounds were making sport of her; that they were echoing her own pain as though in some mocking dream. Thus had Piero, when he lost Tonia, heard in the far distance the music of the pipes! And because of it, Alba rose to her feet and with bowed head turned towards her home. Was not

her pain his too ? Were not all our pains blent into the great world harmony.

Her brain reeled as she turned once more and ran on very fast with intervals of breathlessness and wavering. Once she stopped still and looked round, slowly shaking her head. The wind still reeked of the smoke from the fields ; the sheen of the olive groves was as soft as ever, the sky was blue—and Alba stretched out her hands towards the cool trees.

At the Town Gate she halted behind the dark columns and listened, stuffing her handkerchief into her mouth so that no one might hear her breathe. Not a sound from the customs office, not a footstep on the pavement. She clutched at her brow ; was it perhaps all falsehood and delusion ? If she counted up to twenty and all was silent she would turn back. . . . A cock crowed and she went on.

She stole on tip-toe, she groped her way along the houses. As a glimmer came from a dark doorway her heart leapt into her mouth. . . . At last the Square ; she peered out ; there it lay dazzling and deserted. A cat arching its back in the sunlight took to flight. The fountain trickled feebly. How she trembled with exhaustion ; how heavy her feet were ! Hardly had she reached Lucia's alley when she fell against the wall and closed her eyes.

The silence began to hum and vibrate as though all the bells in the town were pealing, and through the tumult of her fever she bent her ear towards the corner of the street. The sun blazed down on her eyelids and her parted lips, her back slid feebly down from the wall, her hand quivered convulsively beneath the knot of her veil—and Alba waited and listened.

In the silent, deserted town, silent as though it too were waiting, something stirred : the shutter of the

window behind the belfry trembled, trembled very gently and moved up slightly.

And at the end of the town, behind the Corso, Dorlenghi, the conductor, paced his airy room above the smithy; he knocked over the chairs, stopped panting and put his hand to his heart, and then strode on again. Only once did he come to a sudden halt, as though confronted with some insurmountable obstacle, while the corners of his mouth drooped and his hands fell to his sides. . . . A defiant leap—his hands crashed down triumphantly on to the keyboard of the piano and at every note he jerked up off his seat and boldly flung back his head, as though he were riding and had the world beneath his horse's hooves.

But from the bell-tower Don Taddeo looked out. He was standing in the narrow loft of the tower and below him he could see only the circle of battlements. Brown falcons soared up to him from invisible roofs, around him quivered the blue air—and his eager glance traced beyond the town in the open country a little cluster, a little cloud of dust which was creeping away. One grain of this dust had been the world! It had been longing and hatred, passion and recognition, sin and abdication. Where was it now? Who had discovered it? She was going away, away. What anguish! "Once more! Oh God, show her to me once more! Perform a miracle, show her to me!" . . . Then his heart filled with solemn emotion. Don Taddeo knelt down; God had spoken: "Since she is a grain of dust, take all dust to your heart! Since you may not love one human being, love all human beings!"

A rustle in the street. Alba bit her teeth into her lip. A footstep—her head fell back and she flung out her arms. . . . No, she must not die yet, she must not die unrevenged! His invisible step, nearer and nearer—how hollow and terrible it sounded! It trampled on

her heart, it spurted blood. She tore convulsively at her veil, she throttled herself, cut herself—until at last, at last her hand flashed out against this hated breast.

He sank on to his knees just at the corner, with a terrified, bewildered look. Then he saw her and as he knelt before her his lips soundlessly formed her name ; and then he collapsed. He rolled on to his side, tried to support himself. . . .

She had recoiled away a few steps, then she turned and looked round. " Alone ? Alone ? I did not know that I should be alone." And she rushed to where he lay and shook him.

" Nello ! Up ! "—holding her breath.

" Wicked one, why don't you move ? "

She shrank back and gazed at the empty Square :
" Did I really do it ? "

She flung her head on to his breast and whimpered, whimpered. . . .

Behind her the shutters of the window trembled violently.

Alba dried her face on his hair, she kissed his mouth and lay down close beside him. As her hand groped on the ground she said to him :

" Never again shall we two feel the heat of the sun. How dark it is already ! I can no longer see myself in your eyes."

She had found the knife ; she said :

" Alas for us that we must leave life "—and she pressed it into her heart.

The shutter behind the tower banged to. Slowly the shadow crept back from the pair lying there on the edge of the quiet sunlit square. Then a clock struck, slowly and forlornly. . . . But when the twelve even strokes had died away, a faint sound of singing floated up the Corso, a ghostly voice piping a forgotten melody ; and

little old Brabrà minced out on to the Square. He took off his hat and bowed to an invisible company. Then, as he saw the two lying embraced on the ground, he drew far back and with a mischievous smile laid his fingers on his lips.

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